













# VICTOR HUGO

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THE MAN & THE POET

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*BY* WILLIAM F. GIESE

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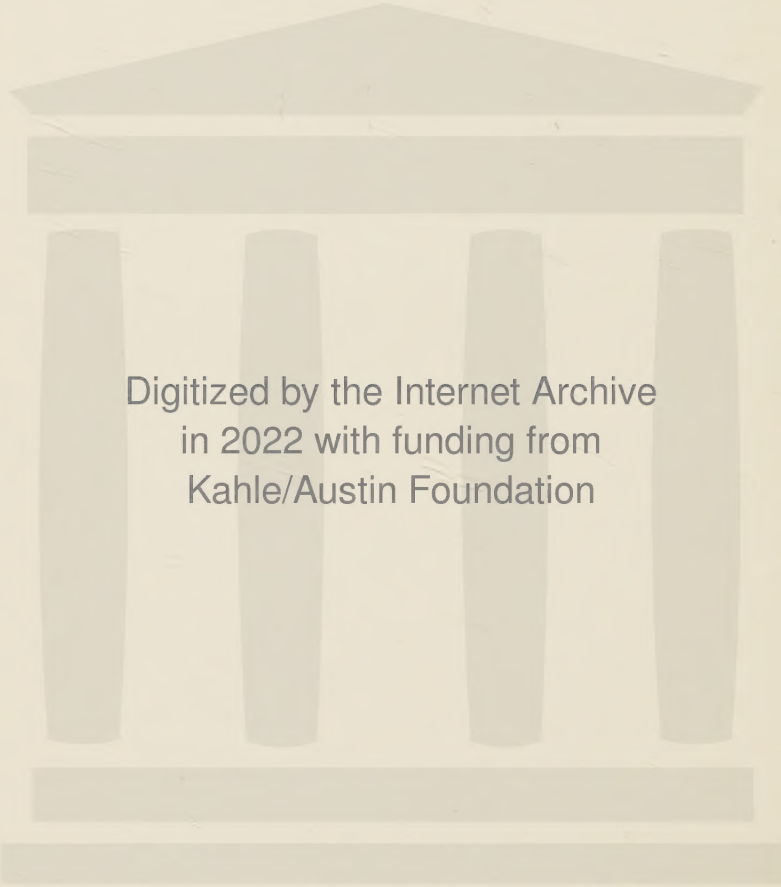
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"To associate the infinite only with the immeasurable, to fail to perceive that the element of form and the curb it puts on the imagination are not external and artificial, but come from the very depths, is to betray the fact that one is a barbarian."

*Irving Babbitt*





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## PREFACE

Hugo's reputation was in his last years so great, both at home and abroad, that he remains to this day of all French writers the one best known and most read in America. "Les Misérables" was once voted by a popular referendum the greatest of all novels; "Hernani" appears to be of all French plays the one most frequently read in our colleges, and the majority of our collegians are perhaps more familiar with *Les Djinns* or *La Conscience* or *l'Expiation* than they are with the masterpieces of Sophocles, or Dante, or Goethe. Our criticism of Hugo, however, has hardly at any time kept pace with our interest in his work. It has been, in the main, timid and perfunctory. The ebb and flow of French opinion, so decided and of recent years often so reactionary, have found almost no reflection among us. We have done little, almost nothing, in the way of revising our original impression or of arriving at a final estimate of the man and the work.

I have in the present volume treated with due fulness both the man and the work, and have emphasized the connection between the two, so marked in the case of most romanticists, and so conspicuously marked in the case of Hugo. I do not study his individual works or his accomplishment in particular fields. I say almost nothing of the dramatist, for example, and—following French precedent in this—almost nothing of the novelist. Goethe was filled with unmitigated horror by "Notre-Dame." We may be sure "Les Misérables" would have pleased him no better. Of Hugo's drama Sainte-Beuve once said that no one would ever be able to speak as ill as he thought. Monsieur Doumic has accepted the challenge. Most American editors of "Hernani" and of "Ruy Blas" have, on the other hand, reduced the eulogist to despair. The French critics are presumably right in regarding Hugo's work in fiction and drama as ultimately negligible in comparison with his poetry. It is by his poetry that he will survive. I have confined myself to the poet and the poetry—virtually to the poetry of his prime, extending from the "Orientales" in 1829 to the "Légende des Siècles" in 1859. I have attempted to analyze Hugo's genius, to show its essentially lyric trend, to exhibit its nature and

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its range, and at the same time to show how the man, omnipresent in the work, has always colored and often marred it. In studying Hugo's poetry I have also attempted, incidentally at least, to study that larger phenomenon which Hugo so brilliantly represents, romanticism. In dwelling as insistently as I do on Hugo's characteristics and limitations, I hope to make more clear the characteristics and the limitations of that romantic literature whose spell, at once so potent and so questionable, has for more than a century been re-shaping our whole modern life and thought as well as our literature. That is the chief reason for inviting the reader to so lengthy a scrutiny of a foreign poet.

The more ostensible object is, however, the weighing of Hugo's own claims upon us. Is he the greatest lyric poet of all time—as Brunetière says? Is he second neither to Homer, nor Virgil, nor Shakespeare, nor Goethe, as more than one French critic has asserted? Or is he, as Sainte-Beuve and Lemaître inclined to think him, a poet to whom we are free, if we choose, to prefer Lamartine, or to whom, with Taine and Nisard, we are free to prefer Alfred de Musset? Is Hugo, in short, very different from his contemporary rivals without being by any means greater in proportion to the difference? Is this perhaps the reason why he appeals more to those who admire novel and brilliant effects in poetry than to those who seek that intimacy of approach and those deeper touches which Hugo so rarely affords? Why are so many readers completely carried away by Hugo, like Swinburne, while so many others, like Sainte-Beuve or Doudan or Scherer or Amiel, seem capable at most only of the mixed sentiment that Walter Pater felt for the Goncourts: admiration tempered by dislike, or, like Matthew Arnold, seem even coldly contemptuous? Why do so many, with the best will in the world to admire the poet, always rise from the reading of his poetry with the same ambiguous impression that fretted Sainte-Beuve? "I have often," says this supreme critic, "put to myself this thorny question: Why do I feel a warm admiration for certain features of Hugo's work and almost at the same moment a repulsion for certain others? Why, for example, in re-reading this great poet am I always in the situation of a man walking in a magnificent Oriental garden, led by an enchanter or by one of the genii, but who finds at every step an ugly and deformed little dwarf whacking him across the legs with a stick, the genius pretending all the time to notice nothing? Why am I thus at once charmed and shocked, tormented and transported?"

These are interesting and important questions. If we would answer



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them, we must first learn to see Hugo and his work as they really are; we must dissipate the legendary haze by which both have been so much obscured—and magnified. Edmond Biré, in his numerous volumes on Victor Hugo, has very effectively accomplished this as far as the poet's life is concerned. He has, indeed, laid down the lines on which any authentic biography of Hugo must be written. He has reduced the demi-god to human proportions and has replaced eulogistic fantasy by stern fact. It is true that for doing so his reward has been in general a storm of abuse and odium such as no other critic of Hugo has ever suffered. Biré has, however, hardly aimed at anything more than the correction of the biographic myths that clustered around the career of the poet. It should seem quite as important to carry a similar corrective process into the study of the poet's work and to reduce in turn to human and credible proportions the super-human shadow that the giant of the legend has thus far cast over the field of criticism. The present volume essays to do this in somewhat more systematic fashion than do the scattered utterances of the many French critics who have collectively, one in this respect and one in that, anticipated virtually everything that I say. Such criticism is bound to be in great part negative. Should I seem to those more reverent than myself of Hugo's genius to be more severe than just, a fault I have tried very hard to avoid, I can only quote in extenuation the words of Emerson: "The great poets are judged by the state of mind they induce; and to them of all men the severest criticism is due." To judge Hugo's poetry, moreover, as Scherer has said, "is no easy undertaking, because one must point out in the same writer, and often in the same work, profundity and puerility, sincere inspiration and unendurable posing, beauties of the highest order and revolting absurdities, so that the reader who has not yet learned to 'admire like a brute' passes at every turn from enthusiasm to repulsion, from transport to disgust."

That an estimate of Hugo's genius, so much more modest than that which he and his worshippers have on the whole thus far succeeded in imposing on the world, should meet with a more cordial reception than did the work of Biré, the writer hardly expects. But the business of the critic is to express his honest thought. The rest he must leave to his readers and reviewers—and to time, that discreetest of judges, which at last infallibly confirms or overrules both poets and critics.



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## CHAPTER I

### THE MAN

Le masque tombe, l'homme reste,  
Et le héros s'évanouit.

J. B. ROUSSEAU

ONE of the first things that strikes the reader of Hugo is the dominance of temperament in his work. Of character, in the sense of corrected and controlled rather than reenforced temperament, he, like most romanticists, possesses very little. He differs, however, from most of the romantic poets in possessing not a feminine but a masculine temperament, one in which strength and energy predominate, not fineness. This is true to such a degree that this imperial vigor retains under all the refinements of his art an essential primitiveness. There is in him at bottom something of the barbarian, of the healthy and robust barbarian, let us hasten to add. As in Balzac's case, this striking masculinity of the work has a powerful physical basis in the man.

Unlike the frank and unpretentious Gautier, who found the perfect self-contentment that eludes philosophers and sages in his ability to give the Turk's head a five-hundred-pound blow with his fist and to make metaphors that stood on their feet, Hugo, in his earlier and ultra-romantic stage, loved to be pictured by admiring portrait-painters as a pallid, thought-sick genius with cavernous eyes surmounted by a vast Sahara of forehead. In reality there was no suggestion of frailty in the powerful physical envelope of the poet. In old age he could boast of having been sick but once or twice in his life, of having lost neither a tooth nor a hair, and of blunting the barber's razor with his stubbly beard. He had an almost unexampled keenness of vision, a detail that is not without importance in a poet three-fourths of whose poetry derives from the eye. He could recall the time when from the towers of Notre-Dame he was able to recognize a friend passing below, or to distinguish the color of Marie Nodier's dress at the Arsenal Library, half a mile away. Even to the last, Hugo could ride in all seasons on the top of the omnibus, could brave the rain without an umbrella, and the cold without a waistcoat and without an overcoat.

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He could walk any distance, could bathe in any water, however cold, (he actually expressed a preference for ice-water); and he could, even in the dog-days, put the dilatory sun to shame by his matutinal forehandedness. He could also astonish the onlooker by the magnitude—and, one is tempted to add, the magic—of his gastronomic prowess, consuming, without either quantitative or qualitative scruples, any viands set before him (though preferring to all else meat in a nearly raw state). He enlivened the spectacle by cracking peach-stones between his teeth, or by swallowing a teaspoonful of tar, or by ingurgitating an orange, peel and all, with a lump of sugar inserted—or a lump of coal, according to a perhaps less veracious chronicler. He asserted that he had never had an indigestion in his life, and that the doctors found that he had at sixty-six the body of a man of forty.

This magnificent energy, instead of running riot and courting destruction, as happened in Balzac's case, is directed by a will of iron and is fashioned to a habit of work that is admirable and even wonderful. Though a poet, Hugo was one of the most methodical and industrious of literary toilers. "A little work bores one, but much work is a pleasure," he used to repeat. He always met inspiration half-way instead of lazily awaiting its visits. *Nulla dies sine linea* was his maxim. "Que je prenne un moment de repos? Impossible!" That is his mood. The paling stars would find him already at his desk, and reappearing at nightfall they would find him there again, the intervening hours having all been wisely apportioned between the Muse on the one hand, and the world, the flesh, and Juliette (the lady of his thoughts) on the other. This steady task-work was maintained almost uninterruptedly for more than three-score years. In fact he did not even consent to repose in the tomb: his productivity was only increased by death, and the posthumous prose and poetry poured forth from the press even faster than did the books of his fecund prime. Despite its insistent method, his work is executed with all the madness requisite for the best poetry. Relying on the authentic communications of his Boswells, we may in our mind's eye see at Guernsey the aged poet toiling from three o'clock in the morning till imminent noon on the strength of a bowl of black coffee and two raw eggs, striding to and fro in travail of thought, or standing—for it seems he disdained to sit—at his desk in the look-out, a sort of roof-conservatory, barely furnished and stiflingly hot, where, like some opulent tropical plant, he bursts into a luxuriant bloom of poetry, inditing feverishly, with a huge goose-quill, huge letters on huge sheets of sky-blue paper, which, like a Sibyl



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in a spasm of fecundity, he tosses over his shoulder, littering the floor on all sides with the rich spoils of his genius.

A will so energetic in the greater matters of life is apt in the smaller ones to degenerate into wilfulness. Hugo carried his abounding energy into all the relations of life in an at times disagreeably masterful manner. He dominated conversation like an autocrat, brooking no contradiction, no variation of opinion. When one of his friends ventured to object to certain details in the plot of "Ruy Blas," he loftily retorted: "My dear sir, I intended my play to have in it things beyond the range of your vision, and I am happy to see that I have succeeded." Asked if he did not find his ignorance of English an inconvenience, he said: "When England wishes to talk to me, she will have to learn my language." He could, even in public, impose silence on his wife by an annihilating look not easily forgotten by the spectator. He could be stirred to such depths of wrath by opposition as to run breathless and hatless out of the house, dashing with frantic gestures down the street into the open country. Even when most demonstrably in the wrong, he preferred to remain so rather than yield. If, not always happy in dealing with things English, he wrote *bug-pipe*, and some Anglican purist suggested that *bag-pipe* were a preferable orthography, he frowningly pooh-poohed the officious critic into silence, and the melodiously incorrect *bug-pipe* still sounds its melancholy strain through many chapters of "The Toilers of the Sea." When nearly eighty, he refused with such vehemence to subscribe for Rousseau's statue, because of that great philanthrope's unscrupulous abandonment of his five children, that he brought on a cerebral congestion which sent him to recuperate (in his mistress's company) at Guernsey, himself unscrupulously abandoning four disconsolate lady-loves at Paris.

He is one of the most quarrelsome and litigious of men. In the first years of his career as a dramatic poet, we find him quarreling with the actors and actresses, with the manager (to the point of a duel, *exclusive-ment*), with his fellow-poets de Vigny and de Musset, with his fellow-dramatist Dumas (a very shabby quarrel on Hugo's part), with the critics Sainte-Beuve, Nisard, and Planche, with the journalists, with the government, with his publishers, with the public, and, vaguely, even with the king. So in 1852 he quarreled with the emperor, the pope, and all that were connected with them, with the Senate, the Academy, the army, and the nation. Finally in the "Légende" he quarreled with the whole historic past. And for fifty years, as we know now from their letters, he quarreled ferociously with Juliette.

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With this temper it is hardly remarkable that he should always have spoken of his critics as enemies, and should have felt himself to be the victim of persecution and conspiracy, a morbid and perhaps pathological trait. He depicts greatness as invariably the lifelong prey of envy and calumny. No great man can lead a life so happy that Hugo will not find it a Calvary. Halley, the astronomer, died at the age of eighty-six, after a career crowned with every kind of success and distinction. According to Hugo, he was hounded to a premature death, interred in hugger-mugger, and consigned to a disdainful oblivion. So, in 1864, Hugo's plays being under the ban, he asserts that Shakespeare is also under an eclipse, remaining, in his own country, the victim of an irreducible fund of coldness, even though the whole outside world (and especially France) had been shouting his name into English ears for three hundred years!

Hugo's rancor is as remarkable for its persistence as for its intensity. What is worse, it allies itself at times with what seems very like calculating malignity. The critic Nisard, while still a novice in literary journalism, offended Hugo by the frankness of his criticism. During the next fifty years we meet Nisard with damnatory repetition, figuring now as an ass roaming at large through Hugo's works (in reality refusing to browse), and now as an ape caged in the *Jardin des Plantes* and exhibited by the affectionate old poet to his beloved grandchildren. The blind archbishop Ségur, who had somewhat severely taken the poet to task, is treated with like ferocity:

Au séminaire,  
Un jour que ce petit bonhomme plein d'ennui  
Bêlait un *oremus* au hasard devant lui,  
Comme glousse l'oïson, comme la vache meugle,  
Il s'écria:—Mon Dieu! je voudrais être aveugle!—  
Ne trouvant pas qu'il fît assez de nuit comme ça.  
Le bon Dieu, le faisant idiot, l'exauça.

Some of Hugo's grudges even dated back to his childhood. In his "Cromwell," he has introduced a devil and an assassin who bear the names of a couple of school-boy enemies. As Brunetière has well put it: "Hugo, in his long life, never forgot anything, nor forgave anything, nor passed over anything in silence, except the good done to him and the services rendered him."

Toward his friends, his attitude has, it is evident, less constancy and less fidelity. "Where the deuce did you get the idea that I never mention my friends in my works?" Hugo writes to Banville. The notion

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had some warranty. In the manuscript of "Torquemada," Hugo had called Leconte de Lisle a mind of the first order: in the proof-sheets he eliminated this eulogy. In an early page he had lauded to the skies a poem of de Vigny: later he suppressed the compliment, but kept alive the page by ingeniously substituting Milton's name for de Vigny's. Before Mérimée had criticized him, he said one day to his friend Stapfer: "There is only one classic in this age, do you hear? *C'est moi*. I am in our day the greatest master of French. After me come Sainte-Beuve and Mérimée." But after Mérimée had criticized him, the mildest name that Hugo could find for him was *imbécile*. Even Goethe, because he had expressed profound disapprobation of "Notre-Dame," he viewed "as Jesus Christ would view Messalina."

Inconstant in friendship, he is not exactly a model of fidelity in love—though his life-long assiduity at Juliette's shrine has, to many of his admirers, seemed to deserve warmer eulogy than is usually accorded to the fettered affections that live under more legitimate auspices. We learn from Hugo's correspondence that in 1851, Juliette's waning beauty not being any longer able to hold its own against the youthful charms of Mme. Biard, Hugo hesitated for four months before making the definite choice between them that each demanded. It may be of interest to note that the *affaire Biard*, in spite of the notorious scandal that traversed its beginning, lasted at least seven years, and that, while Hugo was thus deceiving Adele with Juliette, and Juliette with Mme. Biard, he was also intent on deceiving Mme. Biard with the actress Alice Ozy, mistress of his son Charles—*on s'y perd*. To cite another instance: when Juliette's only daughter, Claire Pradier, was dying, Hugo was apparently prevented by previous engagements from being present to console either the poor woman who devoted her life to him or the poor child whose irregular and sorrowful existence he had contributed to make more so.

A temperament so robustly masculine and even primitive is apt in love to be sensuous and egotistic. These faults are terribly insistent in the record of Hugo's love affairs, the successive instalments of which have perhaps done as much as anything to keep his memory green in the minds of Parisian posterity. The first and most respectable contribution toward this *drame en cent actes divers* is the volume of letters to Adele Foucher, his *fiancée*.

These are a most unusual collection of love letters. The playfulness, the light-heartedness, the smiling moods of happiness, in short, the lyric spirit which a boy of eighteen, and especially a poet, infuses into

the expression of his feelings in this flowering period of his sentimental life, all this is virtually missing. Love expresses itself here without grace and without poetry, awkwardly and even pedantically. The budding poet is an incurable phrase-monger. He speaks precisely like the heroes of his plays. Like them he is an unchained force. His language has the same pomp and artificiality, the same far-fetched and hyperbolic note. It is as if he were trying to put into words feelings for which he found no inner source of suggestion and no inner norm of propriety. The more exalted passages are full of a cheap and unscrupulous rhetoric suggestive of a secret and perhaps unformulated contempt for the judgment of his correspondent. It is a perpetual repetition of Hamlet's strain: Doubt that the stars are fire. It is the language with which a precocious worldling might try to seduce the heart of an untutored *modiste*—pure naïveté, no doubt, on the part of the youthful Hugo, but inevitably inviting the suspicion that he is trying to express his sentiment otherwise and more powerfully than it presents itself in his own heart. It is interesting to find how ingrained in Hugo is this theatrical trickery, this itching for achieving a maximum of effect by means not rigidly honest, and, to more refined minds, repugantly violent.

This note is struck in the very first letter, written before Hugo's eighteenth birthday: "There is no height of devotion that I cannot reach for her, for one of her smiles, for one of her glances. Could it be otherwise? Let her view me with indifference, with hatred even, that will be my misfortune, that is all. What matters it, if it do not disturb her happiness! Ah, yes, if she cannot love me, I must accuse only myself. My duty is to follow in her every footstep, to envelop her life with my own, to serve her as a bulwark against peril, to offer her my head for a footstool, to place myself at every turn between her and every trouble, without asking any return, without awaiting any recompense. Too happy if she deign at times to cast a glance of pity on her slave and to think of me in the moment of danger! Alas! may she but permit me to fling away my life to gratify her every desire, her every caprice: may she permit me to kiss with respect the beloved footprints left by her feet."

The fervency of expression presently grows even more dithyrambic, and reminds one still more of the attempts of youthful lovers to be ultra-dramatic. "They may separate us; but I am yours, eternally yours; I am your chattel, your property, your slave—never forget that; you may use me as a thing, not as a person; in whatever place I may be,



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far or near, write me your will and I will obey or I will die." Is not that the very tone of Hernani or Ruy Blas? It recurs again and again. "My ambition is to make you happy, perfectly happy, to join my terrestrial and tenebrous spirit with your celestial and luminous spirit, my fate with your fate, my immortality with your immortality." One learns without surprise that Hugo used these letters as a source in writing his plays; in truth, they illustrate what love was to him: a form of passion too violent to be translated into the delicate formulas of sentiment.

That in such letters the material truth, as well as the more subtle truth of poetry, should suffer violation at times is only to be expected. Is it to be supposed that Hugo means what he says in the following lines:

"If, just to amuse yourself, you should order me to die to-morrow, I ought to obey you instantly, otherwise I should not love you."

"Were it necessary, in order to obtain you three months earlier, to give up the projects and dreams of my whole life, to follow a new career, to undertake new studies, I should do so, my Adele, with the greatest joy."

"*Eh bien*, to-morrow let them give me my Adele on condition that I never pen another verse in my life, provided only I have some other means of supporting you, and I say, as I would say to God, that I shall never feel that the felicity of winning you has cost me anything, for beside this happiness all the rest is as nothing in my eyes."

Does the following ring more true? "I would give you my future, my blood, my life, I would die amid the most horrible tortures to procure you one instant of joy, and yet you would owe me nothing, not a tear, not a sigh, not a regret, and if you deigned to think for a moment, between two pleasures, of this Victor who died for you, you would be giving him a return to which he has never had the presumption to aspire. . . . The absolute devotion with which I would sacrifice my entire being for yours is my first duty, and I should deserve nothing for accomplishing it, and, I repeat, you would display no ingratitude whatever in forgetting me a moment after my sacrifice. I should have fulfilled my destiny, that is all."

When the lovers are temporarily separated by prudent parents, who doubt the wisdom of an immediate marriage between a young maid of eighteen summers and a penniless poet but a year older, Hugo props the possibly wavering allegiance of Adele by threatening to die. *Ça ne*



*pouvait manquer*—all the heroes in his plays have the same uncheerful habit of startling their lady-loves with these mortuary velleities.

The threat of dying is not the only fetching one. There are other terrible contingencies that may be no less effectively invoked. "They say that solitude drives men mad," he writes, "and what solitude is worse than that of bachelorhood?" It is true, the effectiveness of this is a little diminished by the thought that in this case the solitary bachelor is a stripling of nineteen.

At other moments, he shows the most unreasonable and umbrageous jealousy—and, refusing to see in this a censurable human weakness, he draws the striking conclusion: "Love is neither true nor pure, unless it is jealous."

He also shows himself very querulous and petulant; he is, in short, a most unreasonable young man.

"It is certain that I rarely have the pleasure of seeing you share my opinion. Whatever notion I put forward, if I find anybody contradicting me (and it is curious that this as a rule happens only when you are by), you are much more ready to side against me than for me. It suffices apparently that a truth should be pronounced by my lips to pass for an error in your eyes."

His is by no means the perfect love that casts out fear. One is astonished at every turn to find that he does not try, does not even pretend, to set off the contours of a greedy and passionate love with a halo of poetic idealism, and to hide its essential egotism under adventitious and flowery adornments. Hugo pursues his love with the uncompromising directness of Apollo darting headlong in the footsteps of Daphne. His passion is straightforward and unadorned. He is not only jealous as a Turk and querulous as a child, but he does not even cherish that reposeful confidence in an answering love which is ordinarily regarded as a primary law in the code of true lovers. If he finds Adele dancing when she ought to be sympathizing with his troubles, it never occurs to him that she may be ignorant of them—he swears that she is fickle, if not false. If she smiles when he is sad, he reproaches her for her unseemly gaiety. "You have been for eighteen months smiling and joyous, happy—without me." If a momentary mood or perhaps the cruel exigencies of parlor etiquette separate her from him for a few minutes, he is unable to understand her unfathomable frivolity in looking cheerful under such to him tragic circumstances, and he stoically puts on a look of simulated coldness—or tries to. If she is indisposed during a carriage-ride and seeks

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surcease from pain in closing her lovely eyes, he calls heaven to witness that he in her place would never have practiced such inhuman cruelty, and would have sought relief only in the contemplation of the beloved one's countenance. He forgives her, but he assures her that such things on the part of his adorable Adele leave him "*bien triste*."

In fact, nothing escapes his jealous eye; if in his restless and changeful moods he reminds one of the strange heroes of his own dramas, he sometimes recalls also (despite his tender years) the pedantic husband saddled with a young wife, who, he feels, will bear watching and needs to be lectured.

"I have, my adored Adele, something to tell you which embarrasses me. I must say it, and yet I know not how. But I will commend myself to your indulgence and ask you to consider only my intention. If you see this as it stands revealed in my heart, you will be grateful, and this emboldens me. I wish, Adele, that you feared less to spatter your dress when you walk in the street. It was only yesterday that I noted, and noted with pain, the precautions that you take, etc."

[In these letters, as everywhere in Hugo's work, in spite of the romantic manner and the Byronism, we have a constant sense of being in contact with a fundamentally masculine nature. One is impressed by the underlying strength, by the unhesitating self-reliance of the writer. He cherishes an unwavering confidence in his talent, in his power to work, in his future.] He won Adele, as he won the other prizes of life, by a persistency which no obstacle could disarm, by a will which brooked no thought of defeat. He himself sums up the moral of this early chapter of experience in the last lines of the last letter: "Our history, my beloved one, will be a new proof of this truth that to will with firmness is to triumph."

But there is a more recondite moral than this—one which escaped alike the writer and the recipient of these letters. Will is the basis of what is most effective—but not always of what is finest in human nature. This correspondence, in which there is so much passion and so little tenderness, so much of the fierce egotism and so little of the geniality and the amiable devotion of love, must have been somewhat disconcerting to a young girl about to make the *saut périlleux*. The letters are serious, terribly serious, but not at all sensible. They are full of ardent protestation, but the tone is nowise generous. Their atmosphere is stiflingly personal and also morbidly personal. The young lover's incessant and ungenerous precipitancy, his restless doubts and constantly renascent misgivings, the ebb and flux of his jealous passion, his

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unreasonable accusations, his reiterated grievances, all this might truly have bewildered and perplexed Adele. Had she not been the most simple of *pensionnaires*, she might have felt only too well grounded premonitions of the unhappy future which love and marriage held in store for her, and of the long dynasty of successors that were to make her own precarious occupation of the throne seem one day such ancient history to her, and to her Victor likewise. Some ten years after the "Lettres à la Fiancée," we get an equally ardent series of love letters addressed to the first and the most noteworthy of her multitudinous successors.

To a romantic poet love affairs are of course professionally useful as well as personally agreeable. "Now at last Hugo will write love poetry!" exclaimed the pleased Parisians when it began to be whispered in salons and boudoirs that the hitherto austere young poet had fallen in love with an actress, a certain Juliette Drouet, whose name was far from unknown to the scandalous gossip of the day. This affair proved indeed a very fruitful source of lyric effusion: in the "Chants du Crépuscule" there are not less than a dozen poems addressed to Juliette, along with some half-dozen inspired by Madame Hugo, if I have succeeded in distinguishing the two strata more accurately than the worthy Vinet, who praised the tender conjugal note of certain verses that are unmistakably addressed not to Adele but to her rival. This juxtaposition of alien inspirations is characteristic henceforth of all Hugo's poetry. He even published elegies on his daughter's death in the same volume with madrigals to temporary lady-loves like the maiden among the green rushes. Traces of this double-entry book-keeping reappear also in his correspondence. He writes contemporaneously to Juliette: "The last book I shall read will be your heart. You are not only my heart, you are my whole thought," and to Adele: "Nothing is changed in my heart; I love you more than all the world, *va*; you are my whole life." This tender tone, through long miscellaneous practice, had probably become a habit difficult to throw off even when writing to his wife, for it would be uncharitable to assume deliberate mendacity, in view of the fact that Adele knew at the time that her husband was traveling with Juliette and even complains that he was more than dilatory in withdrawing her responses from the post-offices of Loveland.

Hugo has thus become for the French, who are not always over-nice as to the sources of inspiration, the poet of domesticity and of conjugal

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life. No other Frenchman has written so much tender poetry of the fireside. Among so many poets *sans feu ni lieu* he is distinctively the poet of the home and the family—so much so that he insisted on having two.

In such an ambiguous situation the truly romantic poet always contrives in some inscrutable way to find moral uplift. He becomes not only a better poet but also a better man, when, as Hugo puts it, the Lord edifies the multitude with a sublime spectacle by turning up the soil of genius with the ploughshare of passion. "I have never," Hugo writes to a friend at this juncture, "committed more sins than this year, and I have never been better. I am a much better man now than in my period of innocence, which you regret. Then I was innocent, now I am indulgent. That is a great progress, God knows." Hugo was like most French romanticists: nothing made him feel so near God as the inspiring presence of a grisette. It was an article of the romantic creed of 1830 that the secret of salvation had been committed to the sinners rather than to the saints. A warm feminine admirer, speaking of Hugo's septuagenarian love affairs finely says: "Like Antæus, he was filled with new strength on touching the earth; every contact sent him rebounding higher among the stars."

To Hugo's indulgent countrymen these wanderings of genius in the by-paths of pleasure, these protracted sojourns of the poet in the palace of Armida, have a suggestion of Olympian condescension. The younger Dumas, receiving Leconte de Lisle into the French Academy, found it possible in that polite and sophisticated atmosphere to refer to Hugo's mortal loves in these singular phrases: "This Jupiter has sometimes made a concession to terrestrial loves by transforming himself into a swan or a bull, in order to render himself visible and apprehensible to mortal creatures, in order to prove his grace or his strength, in order to repose for a moment from his labors and his grandeur." "Hugo's loves were, like those of the gods, innumerable," says M. de Régnier grandly. He remained to the very end always ready to renew these *chevauchées de l'amour et de la poésie dans le pays de l'idéal*, as one of his devotees puts it with a felicity that I can borrow but cannot emulate. The world has been only too copiously regaled of late years with pictures of the poet and his hundred lady-loves; of the peer escaping arrest at the hands of an irate husband by wrapping himself in his garment of inviolability,—

Je m'appelle Roland, pair de France, dit-il;



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of Adele pleading with the irate husband for leniency to his imprisoned wife; of Juliette periodically fleeing (for Hugo made her very miserable), and periodically returning to her "cloister"; of Hugo, now weathering storms and tears, now threatening to abandon his infernal *intérieur*, when Juliette became too violently jealous, or when she ruthlessly suppressed suspected portions of his correspondence, especially such as were perfumed, or when she embarrassed his career of amatory conquest by setting detectives on his track, or when she insisted on accompanying him on his successive rounds of visits as Academic candidate for fear that his courting of the Academicians might extend also to their wives and daughters, or when she subjected him to amorous inquisition because he had exchanged a white shirt for a pink one: "Toto, mon petit Toto, où alliez-vous ainsi paré?" (an embarrassing question for a poet bound for the coulisses), or when she went into hysterics on receiving from a younger rival a packet of love-letters meant to substantiate a solidier claim than her own to the poet's heart, or when she found that her cook confounded love of the romantic school with love for its great master, or when the latter, not wholly exempt from the infirmities of age, absently called her Blanche,—

Après quatre-vingts ans son âme est toute Blanche.

Such things, however, as are compendiously hinted here, fall to the share of the ingenious Mr. Gribble, who has taken all scandal for his province, or to that illustrious and versatile French statesman, who, in the intervals between ministerial tenures, like Atlas unloads the world from his shoulders, and for recreation takes to writing up the chronicle of a great poet's love affairs, and gravely weighs how far we may invoke social conventions and even pathologic considerations in the poet's behalf, and how much of his misconduct must be set down to plain lechery. To such competent hands one may safely commend these matters.

Many of Hugo's critics have been shocked, and some even of his admirers have been embarrassed, by this primitivism that defied age as well as morals. Brunetière finds in Hugo "something of the satyr and the ægipan, a poet of love, but only of physical, low, and vulgar love, younger as it were at seventy than at twenty-five." Monsieur Desjardins is in his turn offended by a poem in which Hugo pictures himself, at the time of the Franco-Prussian war, as promenading through the woods with a young lady to whom he delicately hints that



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nature is, so to speak, a vast alcove. The lady, of more martial disposition, talks of war and battles, and only accepts the poet's point of view when he offers to make her the mother of a future avenger of France. Hugo was then almost a septuagenarian,

Vieux par les souvenirs, jeune par les penchants.

In a personality so masculine, so energetic, and so appreciative of material and worldly rewards, a boundless ambition was a very natural trait. At fourteen, Hugo wrote the memorable words: I want to be a Chateaubriand or nothing—and, in course of time, the master, incensed that it was not the latter alternative that was realized, ended by wrathfully denying that he had ever called the poet, as was currently reported, a *sublime child*. At eighteen, Hugo confessed to a friend that he aspired to the peerage. He courted publicity with conquering energy at an age when the ordinary French schoolboy is still studying the past participle. From the outset he left no means unexploited for getting before the world,—academic competitions, official poetry, journalism, and literary coteries. As his fame grew he allowed himself to be photographed, painted, sculptured, caricatured, parodied, and staged. He stood for the Academy at least as many times as dignity would seem to sanction, and on entering it he dumbfounded that urbanely neutral body by submerging the literary portion of his discourse under a veritable political manifesto, in which he contrived to hint his willingness to descend from Olympus into the parliamentary arena, should a stern sense of duty drive him out from his delightful literary seclusion. To make the preparation which his conscience obscurely demanded, he virtually abandoned literature for politics during ten years, and came perilously near playing in his turn the inauspicious rôle of poet and phrase-monger meddling with practical politics—a rôle of whose baneful possibilities Chateaubriand and Lamartine furnish such dread examples. Though he became a peer, a deputy, a senator, he fortunately just missed becoming a minister (which was the chief cause of his quarrel with Napoleon III). He even dreamed of the presidency of the Republic. Spurred by such ambitions, he took to uttering himself publicly on almost every great question both at home and abroad, in poems, speeches, editorials, and above all in letters—open letters—addressed to sovereigns, ministers, statesmen, deliberative bodies, congresses, to whole nations, or to mankind in general—productions more rhetorical than judicial, and for the most part, like holiday cannonry, more gloriously generative of noise than

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of utility. He aspired to figure as the articulate unpatented voice of the great mass of humanity, as the uncrowned king of what in his salon was called the century of Victor Hugo. In practical politics, on the other hand, he played only a very supernumerary part. Yet indirectly, both as publicist and poet, he had no little share in urging his countrymen to the commission of those blunders which were to contribute so largely toward throwing the gloom of tragedy upon French and, as we now see, also upon European history.

On the whole, his great ambition was gratified as that of few men ever has been. He became the most famous literary figure of his day, admired without measure by some, decried without measure by others, discussed by all. "No one," says Émile Montégut, "has stirred so much wrath, furnished pretext for so many literary civil wars, roused such fanatical enthusiasms, kindled such irreconcilable hate or inspired such unshakable devotion. He may indeed say to himself: 'I have not come to bring peace but war.' Count, if you can, all the enmities, all the quarrels, all the blows which his works have caused. People who were intended to esteem without understanding each other, and who would have lived in peaceful disagreement, have been separated forever by the publication of the 'Orientales' or of the 'Feuilles d'Automne'." The chorus of admiration prevailed more and more in the presence of the constantly multiplied proofs of Hugo's genius, and almost drowned, for every ear but his own, the less sustained note of censure. As Pollok said of Byron,

The nations gazed and wondered much and praised;  
Critics before him fell in humble plight,  
Confounded fell, and made debasing signs  
To catch his eye, and stretched and swelled themselves  
To bursting nigh to utter bulky words  
Of admiration vast.

Vacquerie told him that the towers of Notre-Dame were but prefigurements in stone of the glorious H of his name, and Hugo thenceforth wrote this initial with monumental bigness. Leconte de Lisle urged him to address God as *mon cher confrère*. The young poets used to pray: "Our father, which art in Guernsey!" Catulle Mendès thus eloquently apostrophized him: "It is with a kind of terror-stricken awe, like prostrate worshippers dazzled to the burning-point and with eyes petrified and paled by the growingly flamboyant clarity of their god, that we await the manifestations of your genius." Of admirers

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admitted to the presence of the god, some had hysterical attacks and had to be carried out, others fainted with ecstasy.<sup>1</sup> Strange as it may seem, Hugo enjoyed the sweetness of fame in this excessive form—and no one ever received a more colossal allotment of it. In every French city streets and boulevards were named after him; vessels of merchandise and vessels of war, even siege-cannon, bore his reverberant name;—and when a perfervid worshipper expressed regret that, by a culpable oversight, Paris had not rebaptized itself Hugopolis, the poet with pontifical serenity rejoined: “*Ça viendra.*” It did not come during his lifetime, it has not come yet—but perhaps Hugo found a sufficing compensation for this disappointment in the more intimate and domestic apotheosis accorded him by Juliette, who worshipfully conserved as sacred relics of the god the mortal spoils he shed from time to time: an extracted molar tooth and some finger-nail clippings in a bottle. And, by way of posthumous satisfaction, how his pale ghost must have rejoiced in beholding from Elysium his enterprising body-servant selling four hundred pairs of old pants which the knave swore had all successively encased the legs of the greatest lyric poet of all time!

Hugo has not allowed us to overlook anything connected with the great rôle he played on the stage of life.

Regarde-moi. Je suis seul, debout, sur la scène.

He has left nothing to chance in this matter. He proved himself a worthy disciple of that holy Jesuit whom Diderot commemorates, who in dying left behind a box of money intended to defray the costs of beatification and a bundle of authentic memoirs for the confirmation of his virtues and for the use of future biographers. Hugo has been even more profuse—in bundles of memoirs. There is really an embarrassment of riches. To begin with, there are a couple of volumes of autobiography, signed by his wife, but too full of skilful inexactitudes not to betray the hand of the master, although he asserted that he had not even read the manuscript. There are several volumes of correspondence, and finally the portentous collection of his utterances, political and social, upon all the questions of the day for half a century. All the loaves and fishes left over from the feast of wit and eloquence, all the fireworks that went off, and all those that did not, and all the sticks that came down again after the rockets had burned and expired, all, abso-

<sup>1</sup> For an example of the incredible fervor that marked this hero-worship, see the account by Edmondo de Amicis of his first visit to Hugo (in his “Studies of Paris”).

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lutely all, have been unsparingly collected in a five-foot shelf of volumes: *Avant l'Exil*, *Pendant l'Exil*, *Après l'Exil*—a windy sea of words in which even the most seasoned navigator is apt to suffer shipwreck tolerably near shore. It is but just to add that these volumes form the only absolutely unreadable portion of Hugo's work.

Hugo's manner of administering his fame is somewhat ponderous. His romantic competitors, many of them fully as eager as himself to shine before posterity, have usually proved themselves more skilful managers. They have strained off from their lives what seemed best adapted for eliciting posthumous plaudits, and have been content to rest their case on a few volumes of *Confessions*, or *Confidences*, or *Mémoires*. Hugo confronts us with a whole train-load of baggage, and threatens to absorb no inconsiderable portion of our own lives in the intimate study of his. It is really too much. Moreover, even when not directly engaged in building his own monument and adorning it with the record of his own virtues, he is forever attempting by transparent indirection to suborn our verdict in his favor. Direct portraiture is continually supplemented by indirect portraiture. When he talks of Jesus, of Voltaire, of Shakespeare, of Napoleon, of God, he makes it evident that he is thinking only of Victor Hugo. He writes a poem called *Conscience* in which he depicts the eye of God unceasingly fixed upon Cain, but "what he wished to say or hint," says Brunetière, "is that as long as kings shall exist, he, Victor Hugo, will be for them this eye eternally open in the darkness." Hugo has not only sat for his portrait innumerable times throughout his work; he has ingeniously contrived to make several other great men sit for it, while all the time solemnly assuring them that he was but honestly embellishing their physiognomies to make them more presentable before posterity.

He has sketched a hundred-page portrait of the great revolutionary orator Mirabeau: a lion with wildly waving mane, a resistless torrent, a giant, a superhuman monster, a Proteus, a cloud-compelling god, magnificently theatrical in his more ordinary moods, superb and terrible in wrath. If the real Mirabeau be familiar, the romanticized one will puzzle you a little; you seek to remedy the vagueness of the portrait by bringing it to a nearer angle, and suddenly, just as you hit the right focus, the most unmistakable likeness to certain portraits of Victor Hugo, painted by himself, flashes upon you.

In Hugo's "William Shakespeare" there is a very spirited sketch of Æschylus, and an incidental account of the battle waged in the Athenian theater between the conservative old fogies who stood for the



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classicism of Thespis and the younger generation of bolder and more poetic spirits who acclaimed the romanticism of the great unknown genius that was on trial. If you happen (unlike Hugo) to be familiar with Æschylus, and with the usages of the Athenian theater, you will exclaim that all this is pure fantasy. Beware—there is nothing more faithfully real in the world, and if you doubt it, look a second time at the picture and see if there be wanting a single touch that could bring out more plainly the vivid likeness of Victor Hugo at the stormy *première* of “Hernani”!

Turn to the ambitious portrait of the Renaissance sculptor Germain Pilon, in *La Révolution*, and as detail after detail of the romantic ideal of the generation of 1830 flashes upon your vision, you will exclaim: “But this marvellous sculptor has anticipated everything, every essential idea of the romantic school is already here full-fledged!” It is true, and there is even more. The poet who was to embody these ideas is also here full-fledged; we are once again in the presence of a life-sized portrait of the romantic Victor Hugo. “And Germain Pilon?” you ask. Close your volume of Hugo, and open your encyclopædia.

Such experiences may well seem exasperating. When one compares these clumsy methods of self-glorification with the thrice-refined devices of that greatest modern master of the art of romantic posing, Chateaubriand, one painfully feels the difference between a consummate actor, who is a perfect adept in the whole art of making-up, and an understudy, who is a thoroughly tactless performer grossly seeking by sheer self-assertion and blustering loudness to impose on us his own exaggerated sense of his worth. Chateaubriand, with infinite skill, stages his inner life in the most bewitchingly lovely attitudes of melancholy grandeur—they are too beautiful to be true, but that is the very triumph of art over reality. Hugo plays on the surface; he vainly torments and tortures reality until it shrieks or grimaces; at best he can only embellish with cosmetics, perfumery and costumery the vulgar events of his outer life. But how inferior is the result! Consider for a moment the vast difference in taste, in æsthetic perceptiveness, and, to call it by its right name, in stagecraft, shown by these two illustrious comedians in staging their funerals. Chateaubriand, renouncing the notion, momentarily toyed with, of stowing his bones in a Roman sarcophagus, buries himself in a second Saint-Helena in the wave-washed solitude of Le Grand-Bé. Hugo makes an awkwardly antithetic exit from the theater of life in a pauper’s hearse. The one device is epic; the other is an invention only worthy of a melodrama at the Porte



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Saint-Martin. This verdict may seem severe, but after Chateaubriand, taking up the art of spiritual posing on the high level to which Rousseau's genius had raised it, had himself carried it forward to such supreme and delightful perfection, it rouses one's artistic indignation to see it fall back into its old vulgar and primitive devices. After Æschylus we can not return to Thespis, after Talma to Tabarin, after Chateaubriand to Hugo.

Acting, like every form of art, invites great diversity of taste and provokes infinite dispute. How far does the actor spiritually receive the consecration of the part he acts, and how much of his performance is due to mere histrionic skill simulating what it does not itself feel? How much of the illusion he produces depends on the receptivity of the spectator? The latter quality is perhaps the chief factor involved in any personal judgment of Hugo.

There is the purely worshipful interpretation, which grew up during the poet's lifetime, which he carefully fostered, and which flourished altogether uninfluenced by the facts and, for the most part, even without any knowledge thereof. Thus was constituted the Hugo legend, in which the poet appears uniformly good, and great, and godlike.

There is the uncritical interpretation, which defies the facts by an invincibly charitable construction, and makes the poet, in spite of much evidence to the contrary, a very respectable, fairly engaging, and, on the whole, amiable man of letters, all the nearer to our sympathies for having a few human weaknesses.

There is the critical interpretation, which is based on a more penetrating knowledge of human nature, which faces the facts, and which very decidedly refuses to admire Hugo's personality, which finds him indeed very far from being a Heliogabalus or a Cæsar Borgia, which finds him a better man morally than Voltaire, a stronger man morally than Rousseau, a more estimable man morally than Verlaine, yet, after all, a peculiarly disagreeable specimen of the man of letters, neither an honor nor a disgrace to the guild, morally mediocre, with no great virtues, without the magnanimity or the dignity that usually are the apanage of the really great writer, without the amiability or the modesty that are sometimes the redeeming virtues of the small fry of literature. In the last analysis, his worst fault, in life as in literature, is perhaps the lack of taste. He has, more than any other writer, thrust himself upon us, strutted and posed and vociferated, affected empire and demanded vassalage, affected sainthood and demanded canonization, affected godhead and demanded worship. A literary man may have

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twenty times as many vices, and (if possible) twenty times as many faults as Hugo, he may violate every day, not only the seventh, but the other nine commandments, make life an orgy for himself and a tragedy for others, be as thoroughly mean and contemptible as was Swift in the eyes of Thackeray, or Bacon in the eyes of Pope, provided only that he burn his correspondence and his private papers, write no memoirs, feed no Boswells, say nothing about the virtues he lacks and next to nothing about the vices he possesses, we shall contrive to enjoy the products of his wit and not look the gift-horse too insistently in the mouth. But if this animal, that comes in such a questionable shape, insist on devoting the better half of its energies to neighing, or braying, into our ears the everlasting monotone proclamative of its divine origin and attributes, its likeness *à s'y tromper* to the Eternal and Almighty himself, if it continue this procedure every day for fifty years, then we are hardly to blame if we lose patience, and faith, and perhaps even charity, and if we look this gift-horse in the mouth—possibly with a malign desire to prove that it is not a horse at all. Sainte-Beuve writes in his private notebook: “Baudelaire says to me: ‘Hugo is an ass endowed with genius.’ ‘An ass!’ I exclaim, and I try to make him soften his statement: ‘He is an obstinate mule, you mean?’ ‘No, really and truly an ass.’ He clings to the word, and I end by understanding his point of view, by entering into it even.”

In the portrayal of Hugo's character, the facts, as has been hinted, are against him—except such as he has himself furnished us. Anyone who is familiar with the French romanticists knows how questionably even the best of them dealt with facts. Hugo used them only as a despot uses his subjects or as a divinity uses his handiwork—*ad maiorem dei gloriam*. They come into his powerful hands only to be re-shaped; sometimes even, so potent is his godhead, he creates them out of nothing. These rebellious entities, so unmalleable for us unimaginative folk, he in his divine frenzy so marvellously transmutes that they issue wholly renewed and splendidly unrecognizable from his grasp, subservient to his omnipotent will, and ready to yield their homage and support to those very things of which they were before the sworn and eternal foes. This voluntary overflow of the imagination into the domain of fact has furnished the chief motive for the monumental study of Hugo's life and character by Edmond Biré. The five substantial volumes in which he has so relentlessly tracked his biographic prey from covert to covert, convicting him at every turn of flagrant falsehood and sordid charlatanry, are a most depressing revela-

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tion of the weaknesses of genius. His reader can hardly escape saying of Hugo what Madame de Staël said of Wellington: "Never was so great a man compounded of such petty matter."

From the time when the youth of twenty published his *Odes*, dividing the small first edition into no less than eight, in order to simulate an unprecedented sale, up to the time when the gray-haired deputy of seventy privately approved and publicly denounced the peace with Germany, no devices were ever so petty, and few so unsavory, as to be scorned by the politic poet, intent above all else on popularity and fortune. If the radical changes in his political opinions proved embarrassing, he would suppress, in his published work, any sentiments that might be unwelcome, or he would write a poem to meet the altered situation, antedate it, if need be, a dozen years, and publish it as an authentic version of his unaltering convictions. Indeed, no date appended to any of his poems is to be accepted, no statement that he makes in regard to himself is to be believed, no fact that has even for the briefest period enjoyed the hospitality of his mind is any longer to be regarded as pure. Hugo's apologist Rosières explains that Hugo's imagination is so powerful that whenever a fact enters one cell of his brain it immediately sets in motion all the neighboring cells and only issues from them dislocated and unrecognizable. This intercellular vibration more prosaic admirers of Hugo call inadvertency. Biré calls it mendacity. I fear Biré is right. "The first step to greatness," says that old-fashioned moralist Samuel Johnson, "is to be honest." The French proverb runs: "It is only the first step that is painful." Hugo, like the jester, had a predilection for beginning with the second step.

His first step in life, for example, was to be born into a thoroughly bourgeois family, his grandfathers being, one a joiner, the other a gardener. The first step Hugo makes in his Autobiography is to tell us in the opening sentence that there remain no genealogical documents relating to the noble family of the Hugos, anterior to the year 1522. In his correspondence, on the other hand, he says: "Personally, I attach no importance to genealogical questions."

The most picturesque and important step in Hugo's life was that which lifted him high above the common level to throne for twenty years as the old man eloquent, the god in exile. He was banished for his opposition to the iniquitous usurpation of Napoleon III. Hugo's merits in this episode have been very variously estimated. Some have seen in his conduct a supreme manifestation of disinterested patriotism exchanging honors and glory for voluntary martyrdom, endured, even

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courted, for this long period of time, and borne with austere constancy and dignity. Others have not been slow to hint that exile had for Hugo its consolations and compensations which, skillfully administered, made it at once the most endurable and even the most profitable part of his career.

On veut bien des maux qui sont sublimes  
Et l'on se dit: Souffrons, mais souffrons sur les cimes.

His own responsibilities in this case are not without a certain gravity. He thus describes the future emperor on his return to France in 1848:

Alors il vint, cassé de débauches, l'œil terne,  
Furtif, les traits pâlis.

Yet Hugo himself urged Louis Napoleon's recall, supported his candidacy for the presidency, which all sincere republicans feared and opposed, was his firm friend and supporter, even after cloud upon cloud of suspicion had gathered around him, and only deserted him when it became painfully evident that the political glory so long coveted could not be achieved by serving in his ranks.

"He had tried by every possible means to share in the counsels of this government and to become the colleague of the men whom he so vehemently flagellates [in the 'Châtiments']. The facts are there in all their brutal, decisive and terrible materiality. . . . Victor Hugo, who knew how to turn to account for literary purposes all the circumstances of his life, has made a very poetic episode of his proscription and his exile, to which unhappily he exposed himself only after exhausting every possible means of conciliation that might have bound up his fortune with that of the Prince-President."<sup>1</sup>

When they quarreled, Hugo made of his anger a lofty pedestal on which he stood in an attitude of sublime denunciation. The chill blast of exile congealed him permanently in this poetically advantageous position. He was too much an artist to desist from it. He has hardly set foot on foreign soil before he begins to practice the calisthenics of banishment. He writes to his wife: "Never did I have a lighter and a more contented heart"—and at the same instant, looking hopefully toward the political future, he congratulates himself on not having "ventured any theories!"

From this time forth, he sees the universe in the light of this one

<sup>1</sup> Gaston Deschamps, in Petit de Julleville: *Histoire de la littérature française* (VII, 296).



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experience. He enters into the crime of December, as a Troglodyte enters his cave, to make his home henceforth in its somber shadow. One asks in wonderment whether any really great poet could have consented to live day and night, year after year, face to face with such a specter. Henceforth he is the proscrip̄t, the exile, the *habitant du gouffre*, the pallid *navonnier de l'abîme*, the frowning Titan,

L'esclave auguste de l'exemple,  
La pierre du gibet, dont le ciel est l'aimant.

Es-tu mort? Presque. J'habite l'ombre . . .

He enrolls himself among

Les grands vengeurs, les rêveurs fauves,  
Les pâles Juvénals, terreur des Césars chauves.

He haunts the desolate sea-shore, and traverses with giant stride the darkness of the night. He cries out:

Le crâne du poète est un dôme effrayant  
Où de sombres oiseaux volent en tournoyant,  
Et qui dit au grand aigle: O farouche figure,  
Entre! mon diamètre admet ton envergure.

He carries on strange dialogues with the four winds; he apostrophizes Aldebaran; he remains publicly inconsolable for a score of years,<sup>1</sup> and he gives vent to his undying indignation in more than a half score volumes of published or unpublished prose and verse, lyric, satiric, epic, and dramatic.

Avant que je me taise, ô tragique Isaïe,  
O Juvénal,  
O Dante, Ezéchiël à l'œil visionnaire,  
Fier d'Aubigné,  
On verra dans les cieux s'arrêter le tonnerre  
Époumonné.

Aujourd'hui dans une île, en butte aux eaux sans nombre,  
Où l'on ne me voit plus, tant j'y suis couvert d'ombre, . .  
Debout, échevelé sur le cap ou le môle  
Par le souffle qui sort de la bouche du pôle,  
Parmi les chocs, les bruits, les naufrages profonds,  
Morne histoire d'écueils, de gouffres, de typhons,  
Dont le vent est la plume et la nuit le registre,  
J'erre, et de l'horizon je suis la voix sinistre.

<sup>1</sup> In *Pati* (Quatre Vents, III, xxvii) the poet invites the public to witness his debate whether or not he shall commit suicide, an idea which he repudiates in favor of the more alluring plan of becoming sublime, a hero, an archangel, etc.



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Was he in very truth so desolate, so solitary as he affirms? It is reassuring to learn from one of his literary visitors, for he had many pilgrims at his shrine, that he seemed to endure exile with perfect indifference, finding that *la patrie* is not confined to a single soil, is, in fact, only an idea, while Paris is but the *rue de Rivoli*, a street he detests.<sup>1</sup> It is even more reassuring to learn that his wife found her presence so little necessary that she was mostly absent, while the faithful Juliette readily consented to share the poet's long exile. Those who are unduly concerned at his bitter lamentations have allowed themselves to be deluded very much as were the friends of Austin Dobson's *Misogynist*:

His lot, he oft would gravely urge,  
Lay on a lone rock, where  
Around Time-beaten bases surge  
The Billows of Despair.  
We deemed it true. We never knew  
What gentler ears he told it to.

Those who allow themselves to see Hugo's exile from the angle of Parisian gossip are apt to see, instead of an august victim, a bearded old gentleman, perched on a beetling crag, shaking his fist and sputtering wild invectives seaward—while, at a little distance behind him, stands his mistress solicitously murmuring: *Mais, viens donc, viens donc, mon chéri! Tu t'enrhumeras!* Hugo himself has, in an unguarded moment, authorized this version of his exile:

L'homme le plus semblable aux antiques Hercules,  
Egal par sa stature aux noirs événements,  
Qui dompte la fortune en ses poings incéléments,  
Et fait au sort jaloux l'effet d'un belluaire,  
Cet homme, s'il rencontre une femme, veut plaire,  
Tombe à genoux, adore et tremble, et ce vainqueur  
Du destin est toujours le vaincu de son cœur.

From such facts as these his admirers avert resolutely their gaze. From Achilles, the dalliant lover, or from the vituperative Achilles, quarreling with friends and foes and complaining to gods and men on the shore of the sounding sea, they bid us turn to the truly epic Achilles, triumphantly resisting Agamemnon's violation of the constitution, going into voluntary exile, renouncing all advances and all amnesties, cultivating an austere heroic desuetude cheered only by his tuneful lyre and by the attendant spirit, Patroclus-Vacquerie, and finally re-

<sup>1</sup> Charles Edmond in Goncourt: *Journal*, I, 377.

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turning from his magnificently prolonged sulks to be present, and if fate demand it, to die at the fall of the beleaguered city. "I will go to the ramparts with my gun on my shoulder. I want no share in power, but I want a full share in the danger," Hugo wrote valiantly to Paul Meurice in 1870. It is true he connived gracefully when Fate reversed these conditions and gave him power without peril instead of peril without power. His gunnery, though superb, remained purely literary, and although it may have wounded many, it killed none. As for his disinterestedness, his nearest friends, even his own son, admit that he had designs on the presidency. And as regards his valor, a certain general relates that although the poet was repeatedly invited to dine in his fort, "he never dared to come!" Another witness relates that, at the time of the *coup d'état*, when a fiery deputy, riding in an omnibus alongside of Hugo, insisted on haranguing the populace through the window, the poet prudently pulled him back by his coat-tails, exclaiming: "Do be still, or you will get us all massacred!" Yet it is perhaps not necessary that a poet, although he sings of heroes, should himself be a hero. If not fully satisfied by this consideration, the reader has only to turn to Hugo's own version of all this in the "History of a Crime" in order to find the ideal of the poet-hero restored. Here he will find the most heroic figure that has been created since Homer—or, at least, since "The Three Musketeers." And here he will find the deputy frantically pulling at the poet's coat-tails!

At all events, Hugo is thoroughly capable of the heroic mood, if not of the heroic act. It is related that he seriously proposed to end the Franco-Prussian war by a duel with King William. "We are both old," he said. "He is a great sovereign, and it is agreed that I am a great poet. Why should we not decide the quarrel which divides our two peoples by single combat and spare so many lives?" It should be added that Hugo also issued to Napoleon III a similar challenge—couched in alexandrines.

Courtesy, goodness, modesty, and even humility are among the virtues to which Hugo aspired with an ardor that leads him at times to magnify a little perhaps his actual achievement. In attempting to estimate it, one is at the outset confronted by the fact that there is very little testimony as to his goodness, and none, I believe, as to his modesty, except his own. That, at any rate, is abundant as regards all his virtues. In a truly magnificent burst of poetic eloquence, he grandly says:

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Clairières, vallons verts, déserts sombres et doux,  
Vous savez que je suis calme et pur comme vous.  
Comme au ciel vos parfums, mon culte à Dieu s'élançe,  
Et je suis plein d'oubli comme vous de silence!  
La haine sur mon cœur répand en vain son fiel;  
Toujours,—je vous atteste, ô bois aimés du ciel!—  
J'ai chassé loin de moi toute pensée amère,  
Et mon cœur est encor tel que le fit ma mère!

Let us study the manifestations of these virtues in Hugo's life. As to his meticulous courtesies, some are convinced, some are doubtful. Monsieur Lanson<sup>1</sup> is skeptical, and sets it down as the merest affectation on the part of one who was not at all a man of the world. At any rate, Hugo never failed to speak of himself as receiving an honor when he felt that he was bestowing it; he never grudged an insignificant compliment to a man of talent, or a more substantial one to a man who lacked it; and he never disdained an exchange of flatteries, even on the most Cyclopean scale, with anybody, high or low, his blessed capacity to give being only exceeded by his truly phenomenal willingness to receive.

This is a rooted and permanent quality in him. As a lad of twenty, he writes to de Vigny: "Have you completed your formidable *Inferno*? It is a page of Dante, a picture by Michael-Angelo, the triple genius." In similar style he writes to the sculptor David d'Angers:

Au sépulcre prêt à descendre,  
César t'eût confié sa cendre;  
Et c'est toi qu'eût pris Alexandre  
Pour lui tailler le mont Athos!

Such verse does not exactly have the ring of true poetry or of true praise, but as panegyric it is magnificent! Hugo, when in this complimentary mood, is capable of finding in Méry a son of Virgil, of finding in Jules Janin imagination, style, all the magic of poetry and the ideal, manly pride, incorruptibility; he hails Baudelaire, the very empty singer of a very idle day, as a thinker, a vigorous intelligence; he hails the author of the Rope-dancing Odes, Banville, as an Aldebaran of art among the stars of the first magnitude; to the author of "The Mohicans of Paris" he says: "You are the light"; in Paul de Saint-Victor, the romantic critic who substituted ecstasy for ideas, he detects another profound thinker, a shining intelligence disengaging an illumination that dispels the night; Emile de Girardin, that mercenary journalist, is praised for that honey-cake, his noble style. In Auguste

<sup>1</sup> The early Lanson—later he has been less severe.

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Vacquerie, that most amusing of all the specimens in his menagerie of literary parasites, Hugo found all that is best in Pascal, all that is best in Voltaire, and something besides.<sup>1</sup> To that even more obscure giant of intellect, Paul Meurice, Hugo says:—

Sois loué, doux penseur, toi qui prends dans ta main  
Le passé, l'avenir, tout le progrès humain,  
La lumière, l'histoire, et la ville et la France, . . .

What wonder, after that, that Meurice became Hugo's editor and *cornac*!

The wanton confidence displayed in the digestive powers of those to whom Hugo administered such substantial pellets of saccharine was perhaps engendered by the extreme facility with which he himself disposed of the large percentage of the total output of the age, which was conveyed to him from all quarters in vast bottoms that came to anchor and discharged their cargoes at his private docks—without in any degree prejudicing his own active home-manufacture. He actually enjoyed—and in private rather required—apotheosis. Juliette, after forty years of intimacy, is suffered to write to him in this vein:

"The month of our love is also that of your birth, more luminous and more useful and more auspicious for the human race than that of Christ. And in some near future men will date the years from Victor Hugo as we yet date them from Jesus. I kiss your feet and worship you." (Letter of Feb. 17, 1873.) Vacquerie writes in the same style:

Une nature encor dans votre tête est née,  
Et le printemps aura son jumeau cette année,  
Ici-bas et là-haut vous serez deux seigneurs.

As Boileau says,

Un sot trouve toujours un plus sot qui l'admire.

At Nero's court, it is said, the life of an awkward flatterer was not easy. Nero was apt to kill him. Victor Hugo invited him to dinner—and read him his unpublished poems. *Autres temps, autres mœurs*.

<sup>1</sup> This domestic pet Hugo fed fierce with the raw meat of his own uncritical pronouncements until it was at last ready to make a vicious spring at any of the rivals, past or present, that Hugo particularly hated. Cf. Vacquerie's chapters on *Tragédie* and on Musset in "Profils et Grimaces," and (in a different vein) the unforgettable passage in which he proposes that we undertake to civilize and educate the tiger, and cries out to the jackal: *Embrassons-nous, mon frère!*



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Sometimes the meals came first, and the panegyric was post-prandial. Gustave Planche, the critic, perfidiously enjoyed Hugo's hospitality, and then, blind to the obligations involved, told the world what he thought of Hugo's poetry!

Toujours quelque bouche flétrie,  
Souvent par ma pitié nourrie,  
Dans tous mes travaux m'outragea.

Hugo, in truth, was quite incapable of seeing any merit in any one who had not first seen merit in him, nor did he ever really approve of any author in the past who had not done preliminary obeisance to his genius by resembling him in advance—or by seeming to. Hence his deadly hatred of Racine, of whom he had spoken with supreme admiration for a dozen years—until he found Racine opposed by the classicists to himself. Hence his strange coolness toward Virgil, once his favorite poet, when he came to realize that Virgilian art would always be the fatal pattern of restrained perfection against which the defects of his own work would stick out most fierily. It seems incredible that any one who had ever truly felt the spell of Virgil should end, as Hugo did, by calling him "the cowardly singer of a cowardly tyrant," in whom he "developed the instincts of the hyena," a poet whose muse is named "Ten Thousand Sesterces." Even taste has its pieties.

Let us pass on to Hugo's other virtues. Among extraneous tributes to his goodness there is that of his secretary, Lesclide, who appears always to have held his master in affectionate remembrance. He tells us that Hugo's kindness was extreme, and that he never willingly inflicted pain on any one, unless he deemed severity or anger a duty (a proviso that would seem to have applied to all contemporaries who refused to admire him).

He was heard to swear only on very rare occasions, says Lesclide, and then only between his teeth. We learn from the same source that he refused to eat lobsters, having once heard them squeal on being plunged into the kettle. Yet it would seem that ultimately the poet must have lifted this interdiction, for his grandson relates that he used to pull off a leg from the cardinal of the sea (as Janin called it) and grind it up, bones, shell and all, between his iron teeth. Doves, thanks to their rôle of messengers during the siege of Paris, also enjoyed gastronomic immunity.

Diligent research might perhaps disinter further contemporary testi-

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mony to Hugo's goodness, but why seek so far afield for what may be had at home without the asking?

Je suis toujours celui  
Qui va droit au devoir dès que l'honnête a lui.

In the preface to one of his latest works, Hugo pictures his friends anxiously remonstrating with him for his over-strenuous fulfilment of his apostolic duties:

Tu vas t'user trop vite à brûler nuit et jour;  
Tu nous verses la paix, la clémence et l'amour,  
La justice, le droit, la vérité sacrée,  
Mais ta substance meurt pendant que ton feu crée.  
Ne te consume pas! Ami, songe au tombeau!

But the poet is inflexible at his post:

Calme, il répond: Je fais mon devoir de flambeau.

Hugo tells us in his correspondence that he was, almost at the very outset of his career, already supporting widows and relatives who bore his name (they seem to have vanished, leaving no trace). When in exile, and living (so he writes Adele) on a hundred francs a month, eating only one meal a day plus a cup of chocolate, he claims to have fed (more nourishingly, we hope) numerous fellow-exiles (none of the ingrates, so far as I know, ever acknowledged the favor). At the same time he fed several widows (who never publicly boasted of the honor), and some needy men of letters (who, of course, maintained an ungrateful silence). Even the great Balzac is included in this list—but his silence is explicable inasmuch as he had long been dead at the date when Hugo so hospitably entertained him.

Hugo, while at Guernsey, also gave a weekly dinner to a group of poor children, whose number, in his report, like that of Falstaff's enemies, increases at each successive mention. Lest they, too, should observe the same incommunicative attitude as Balzac and his other *protégés*, Hugo has himself made a few dozen modest references to these dinners, and also had himself occasionally photographed in benevolent presidency over the festive band,—standing in smiling benignity on the stairway, while the children eat—with upturned, wandering eyes, moving in a fine frenzy from the table to the poet, from the poet to the table. Hugo remembered his little nameless deeds of kindness better than he did many other items that concerned himself. This particular charity cost him, he says, some 7000 francs per annum at a time when

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his own domestic budget was restricted to less than twice that sum (Hugo never withheld any of his book-keeping from the public). The carping critic might suggest that this represents an unhygienically high price per plate. As it is highly improbable that Hugo should have been engaged in further charities, without informing us of the fact, his book-keeping may seem a trifle inexpert. But no—further inquisition shows that a portion of this sum went into petticoats (for Juliette? again suggests the skeptical critic—but in her own letters, recently published, Juliette complains that the poet dressed her like a pauper and left her fireless in winter). Let us be thankful if the skeptic does not go so far as to lend ear to Hugo's brother-in-law, who asserts that these dinners were instituted by Madame Hugo, were paid for out of her private purse, and were, in her absence, carried on by her sister, the poet's rôle throughout remaining purely ornamental—another avatar of the great decorative artist! It is characteristic that Hugo should have ended by feeling that he was actually the inventor of this art of feeding the poor, which lovers of humanity fondly conceive as dating from the Stone Age at least. "It has," he says, "received a magnificent extension and has become a veritable institution expressed in formidable totals. This idea, which started at Hauteville House, is, thanks to the press, being propagated in every country, etc."

The strange coincidence in ungrateful silence already alluded to seems to have extended to all Hugo's beneficiaries. No one, for example, appears ever to have succeeded in borrowing money from him and to have lived to tell the tale—though survivals among those who failed seem not uncommon. Does this justify the charge of avarice so frequently brought against the poet? Or shall we say of him, as of his own Boaz,

Il était généreux, quoiqu'il fût économe?

Perhaps so—for when he died, he left to his lifelong friends and clients, the poor, out of his trifling accumulation of seven millions, a sum of not less than fifty thousand francs,—just enough, the calculating critic observes, to buy a half-penny roll for each of the million specimens of needy humanity who flocked to his funeral (the many, who got so disgracefully drunk on this occasion, evidently not becoming so at the poet's expense). While the brass bands were playing and the banners were streaming, while the politicians were praising his poetry, and the poets were praising his politics, and the critics were mostly maintaining a discreet silence, while the *décolletée* princesses

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(further beneficiaries of the poet) were packing their trunks and preparing to flee from his henceforth virtuous mansion, the mortal remains of the great poet were, at his own modest request, being trundled in the pauper's hearse toward the Pantheon—and the long masquerade of his life fittingly ended with the masquerade of his death.<sup>1</sup>

The key-note of Hugo's life and character is vanity. In everything that has been said thus far, at every point at which the drill has been sunk into the soil, we have invariably and without much need of profound penetration, encountered the bedrock of egotism, the omnipresent stratum of vanity. The treatment of this topic can no longer be avoided; it must needs crown the edifice of any serious study of Hugo's character.

For Sainte-Beuve, who had a very keen eye for his faults, this was his central weakness. "He is insatiably greedy for praise," he writes. "Though you were to serve him every morning a slice as huge and thick as the famous marble platform on which they played comedies at the *Palais*, he would soon have it digested, and before nightfall, half-gaping, would be asking for more. His worst fault is the immense pride and limitless egotism of a life that recognizes nothing save itself: all the evil lies there." One may safely assert that, from the huge block of the poet's works, what he has made it easiest for the eye of posterity to disengage is the noble statue of the poet. Sainte-Beuve is right. In which of Hugo's volumes can one read a half-dozen pages without encountering some neatly imbedded or flauntingly protruding panegyric of his own merits? In which can one find any really sincere line hinting the existence of any moral imperfection that puts him on a common level with frail mortality?

Hugo has, however, complicated matters a little by the incongruous intrusion of a sedulously cultivated semblance of modesty in the foreground of his self-assertion. No other writer ever scattered through his works so much self-abasing phraseology. It is plain that he worshipped modesty in the abstract as much as any man, and that he even loved to see in himself such tender buds and shoots of it as could thrive in the heavy shadow of his towering genius. In his volume on Shakespeare, for example, he allowed modesty to prevail so unduly that at the end of the first of the five books he omitted to predict his own coming as the successor destined to eclipse the great

<sup>1</sup> For an irreverently humorous travesty of this ceremony, see Jules Lemaître: *Les Funérailles de Firdousi*, in "Dix Contes."



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poet, thus marring the symmetry so well observed in the four other books. Already, at the age of eighteen, in his first letter to de Vigny, he says, in humbly referring to two half-forgotten rhymers, Soumet and Pichat: "Will these two future kings of our stage remember that there exists, in a hole near the Luxembourg, a kind of animal who resembles a poet as a monkey does a man, and who, while jabbering the language which they speak so well, is their brother, at least through the friendship which he bears them?" When Hugo discovered that he had forgotten to be modest in the preface to his "Burgraves," he inserted, as a happy afterthought, a long string of humble phrases and formulas down the margins of the proof-sheets. In general, he did not show such forgetfulness, for his prefaces are (in spots) the most modest utterances ever penned. Pecksniff himself would have recognized his master in Hugo. No man was ever so fond of alluding to himself as nothing, as less than nothing. He can write a dozen-page preface to a volume of poems and assert, in concluding, that in all that he has said he has never thought for a moment of his own inadequate and beggarly work. We open the volume, however, only to find at every turn an almost indecent exposure of his virtues through the rents in his robe of modesty. He tells us that the things which he disdains would suffice for the glory of crowned monarchs, and that, if he chose to rise to his full height, he could overshadow every possible rival. He even hints that, like the poets of old, he strikes the stars with his "calm and thundering" forehead,

Moi, qui, déployant mon aile,  
Touche parfois d'en bas à la lyre éternelle.

It is in such passages that we have the real Hugo. Here he has thrown off all false modesty and become himself.

Hugo's vanity is not, like Lamartine's, of the anodyne variety. It does not invite indulgence, it is of the blustering, elbowing, actively disagreeable kind. It has contracted an offensive alliance with his egotism. It has an acrid quality. It overflows and, like a corrosive acid, eats into not only modesty but every other virtue with which it comes into contact. It colors and distorts his whole vision of things. If the philosopher Caro receives a decoration, Hugo is sure it is conferred only because Caro had criticized his "Contemplations." If "Hernani" meets opposition in the classic camp, Hugo feels that he is, after the prime minister, the most hated man in France, and the most talked of. "The quarrel spread to the departments. At Toulouse, a

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young man fought a duel over "Hernani" and was killed. At Vanves, a dying corporal dictated this epitaph: *Ci-gît qui crut à Victor Hugo.*" If a few disaffected Belgians harmlessly pelt his windows with pebbles, the great man, as Sarcey says, picks them up to build a pedestal for his vanity. He transforms this petty incident into a destructive bombardment,

Hier on est venu chez moi pour me tuer,

and he sanctions, in Barbou's account of the affair, a picture of his granddaughter with a huge hole in her head.

This tendency to see himself always in epic enlargement accounts for his grandiose and oracular manner. It is the explanation of the singularly pretentious fashion in which he usually speaks of his own works. Prefacing the two solid volumes of the first "Légende," he says: "Of the poem which the author has in mind, the reader is vouchsafed here only the merest glimpse." Prefacing "Hernani", he says: "Hernani is but the first stone of an edifice which exists entire and complete in the head of its author, but of which the totality can alone give any value to this drama." Prefacing his next play, he says: "What is the inner thought hidden under three or four concentric layers in 'Le Roi S'Amuse'?" Evidently that advocate of the claims of pure humor who complained that no Frenchman knows how to be amusing without being witty had never read the prefaces of Victor Hugo.

This imperial tendency to see in the universe little else than himself leads Hugo to treat his contemporaries with a certain condescension that hardly disguises his secret contempt. In letters to George Sand, he vaguely praises her successive novels, declaring that each one inspires in him an ebullition of joy; but in a conversation with Claretie he acknowledged that he had never read any of her novels, nor anything else of hers, except one little sketch. "I am like Cuvier," he said, "who could reconstruct a mastodon from a single bone. I have read only "La Marquise," nothing more; that is enough for me. Her whole genius can be found there." To pretend to know the whole genius of one of the most renowned of his rivals by reading a score of pages may well seem a bit fatuous. However, Hugo went farther than this at times. According to Turgenieff, he once terminated a discussion of German literary mastodons by crying out: "Goethe and Schiller! I have never read them at all—yet I know them better than any of you."

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Another result of this incessant preoccupation with himself is the absence of any deep and lasting friendships in Hugo's life. He was, as Monsieur Mabillean puts it, *bienveillant pour beaucoup, dévoué à personne*. He has courtiers, worshippers, parasites in plenty, but no really intimate friends. He began his career in a literary coterie, he ends it in a literary court. He plays the monarch, and he lives in a sort of imperial isolation. He has alliances, not friendships. The rare individuals who seem real friends are on such a footing of perfect inequality with the poet that one inevitably suspects that they were suffered for utilitarian ends rather than cherished for sentimental ones. This Triton will have none but minnows about him.

Consider Gustave Rivet. This forgotten poet dined many a time at Hugo's board—but in return he wrote things like this: "In a few years, when the ephemeral and noisy reputations of the day have vanished, when one by one the voices of the age have grown silent, alone, the utterance of our Poet will resound through the future, and his immortal books will be the Bibles of our descendants."

Consider Alfred Barbou! One day, when Hugo in the fervor of poetic inspiration was walking in the fields and reciting aloud the verses which the Muse whispered, he suddenly became aware of a hot breath and a sympathetic susurration coming over his shoulder—it was a friendly cow, says the prosaic recorder. I suspect that he is in the wrong, however, for this same warm and sympathetic susurration pervades every page of a certain most worshipful life of Victor Hugo signed with the mortal name of Alfred Barbou—and written under the supervision of the poet.

Consider Auguste Vacquerie and Paul Meurice! a brace of worshippers of as noble breed surely as ever poet possessed. Hugo had none better. With what canine fidelity they dogged his steps until he crossed the frontier into immortality, on whose hither side they came to a stand, with dismal ululations proclaiming to the welkin their undying attachment to the master, publishing the "chestful of masterpieces" that he had left behind, editing his correspondence, keeping his accounts, watching by his tomb—and, in the innocence of their hearts, never for an instant suspecting why the great man had so enleashed and enkenneled their devotion.

Hugo's correspondence is in this connection a significant document,—because of its very insignificance. We look for an account of his thoughts, his feelings, his experience,—and we get the account of his finances, his advertising, his literary wire-pulling. These are com-

munications, not letters. Every one of these epistolary encyclicals fits into the programme of his life and fulfils a distinct purpose. Hugo's letters, so far as we have yet got them, are an orgy of vanity and calculating egotism—the calculation is even carried so far that his talent is hardly manifest here; he evidently reserved it for his books. The letters show nothing of ease, of abandonment, of good humor, nothing of naturalness. They do not come from the heart—except in occasional passages where he alludes to his children. When he talks of them, he is amiable and often charming. Here we have his human side. All the rest is godlike, or businesslike. During the last thirty years of his life especially, he speaks always like a god new-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill. The apocalyptic pose that marks the poetry of this period is reflected in his letters. He speaks as from an Olympian height, and as though he enveloped with a ray of his splendor those to whom he communicates himself. He talks like an oracle, with grandiose emptiness and with a Pythian duplicity. His politeness is over-emphasized. Compliments abound, often of a dimension that might suggest a malign intention of forestalling any possibility of their being swallowed by the recipient. “Le compliment se parachève en madrigal,” says Monsieur de Régnier. Each of them, on close inspection, is seen to have a price-label attached. If the compliment is appropriated and the label thrown away, Hugo cries out like a man whose pocket has been picked. He had called de Vigny a Dante and an Angelo. De Vigny had failed to note the market-value of these compliments. Hugo indignantly writes to Sainte-Beuve: “The *gentleman* is indeed waxing fabulous; he is even more to be pitied than blamed. He will be delighted if my “Roi S’Amuse” falls flat. That is the way he pays me for my frantic applause of his Othello.” And in his wrath (thirty years later) he suppresses de Vigny's name from among his marriage-witnesses and substitutes Soumet's. When that candid soul, George Sand, unguardedly repays his madrigals by venturing to criticize his picture of the good bishop in “Les Misérables,” he peevishly writes: “Your letter grieves me. Judge how painful is my surprise. I had fancied that this book would draw us closer together, and instead it creates a wider interval between us, almost alienates us.” Hugo has something of the same irritable susceptibility as that frequent victim of his sarcasm, Baour-Lormian, who, when a flattering friend told him that his fifteenth canto was finer than anything he had ever read, asked crestfallen: “Don't you think my fourteenth was just as fine?”



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Vanity so colossal and so irritable will not suffer itself to be blamed and praised according to the measure that is meted to ordinary mortals. Hence Hugo's lifelong wrath at the critics. There is frequently in his work, from the very beginning, a plaintive note, which to the careless reader might seem perilously akin to a whine. It is really the subdued growl of the lion.

Nous écrivons au bord des mers d'austères livres,  
Et ce que nous disons, faisons et publions  
Ressemble à la colère énorme des lions.

In *A Olympio*, after devoting hundreds of lines to retailing the insults he suffers and to a magniloquent *apologia pro vita sua* (*cum Julia*), he adds:

Ne me console point et ne t'afflige pas.  
Je suis calme et paisible.  
Je ne regarde point le monde d'ici-bas,  
Mais le monde invisible.

One is irresistibly reminded of Tartuffe:

La volonté de Dieu soit faite en toute chose!

According to some critics, the originality of romanticism consists in having introduced the ego to a place of honor in literature. Many a page of Hugo would suggest that he might, without immodesty, claim the still greater originality of having eliminated everything else, so completely does he at times subordinate the rest of the universe to himself. Nothing remains but himself and (a little hesitantly) God. In no poet is the word *moi* so omnipresent. An informant (whose veracity I do not altogether guarantee) declares that the publishing houses that print his works always add to the twenty-six cases devoted to the alphabet a twenty-seventh containing the word *moi* in a block. No poet was ever so incapable of treating any subject without emphasizing his own personal attitude towards it. If he pictures the infinite twenty times, nineteen times shall you find the poet's self dwarfing it by a complete usurpation of the foreground. Too modest in his earlier days to assume the title of a god, he nobly resolved to do more, to deserve it. He was content merely to call himself Olympio, and complacently allowed himself to be treated as a demi-god. Later he resented this tendency to do things by halves. He very resolutely

Assumes the god  
Affects to nod  
And seems to shake the spheres.

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If the king refuses to rescind the interdiction of one of his plays, he blazes like an angry Jove from the empyrean:

Cette main, s'il l'ouvrait, redoutable envoyé,  
Sur la France éblouie et le Louvre effrayé, etc.

God himself strangely dwindles when brought face to face with Hugo,

Et maintenant, seigneur, expliquons-nous tous deux!

he says severely, when dissatisfied with the Almighty. He also identifies himself with Christ—gradually, it would seem, invading and annexing the attributes of the Trinity. If his work is received coldly, he speaks of himself as crowned with thorns, as crucified, and then, piously desisting from recrimination, he adds:

Remettons-nous à notre éponge de fiel!

As he says, "Martyrdom is a sublimation, a corrosive sublimation." Even to the last, however, he observes a certain etiquette and affects a certain modesty. He almost seems at times a sort of *Dieu malgré lui*, a protesting god who has had divinity thrust upon him. He accordingly expended much ingenuity in trying, now to find the most transparent synonyms, and now to justify so convincingly his claim to the title that his contemporaries might perforce confer what he seemed too scrupulous to assume. His favorite stratagem is to arrogate divinity for all genius, content to let his own evident precedence over others assert itself. "What the Logos began, literature continues. After the creative action, the civilizing action." He even ends by telling us that the man of genius is God pseudonymous.

C'est Dieu masqué, mais c'est Dieu.

Yet he does not exactly identify genius with God. It is rather a quintessence of God, a sort of portable and tangible epitome of what is best in him, the rest being as it were negligible, bulk not thews. Hugo, alongside of God, has an air of being Achilles beside Ajax, a kind of celestial Lloyd-George beside a heavenly George V. Hugo once said: *Napoléon gênait Dieu*; one has a little the feeling that God embarrassed Victor Hugo—until the poet, so to speak, finally absorbed him.

A sense of the ridiculous would of course have interfered with this unalloyed enjoyment of himself. Nature, which bestowed on him so many other favors, kindly withheld this one embarrassing gift, and

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no shadow of skeptical doubt ever clouded the lifelong worship that the poet paid at his own shrine. But happiness, even under the most auspicious circumstances, is never complete. Other worshippers showed less fervor or less assiduity; there were heretics, too, who even entertained impious doubts about Hugo's godhead. When he spoke in the Chamber, for example, they sometimes interrupted him—nay, at times even laughed at him! "You laugh, do you?" cried the new Dogberry, "well! to-morrow all France shall know that you have laughed. *Greffier*, write down that they have laughed."

This all-invading vanity colors Hugo's whole life as it does his whole work. It led him to over-estimate and misdirect his talent, to attempt things forbidden to his genius, to spend ten years of his life in trying "to surpass Shakespeare as much as Napoleon did Charlemagne," to waste ten years more in sterile preluding to a rôle in practical politics, to make the usurpation of Louis Napoleon a personal grievance around which his thought petulantly revolved for twenty years more. It led him, though destitute of every qualification, to aspire to become a peer, and even a president of the republic. It led him, though peculiarly destitute of either political wisdom or religious insight, to devote half his verses to political and religious themes. It nearly spoiled his poetry by the wearisome obtrusion of the poet, and it quite spoiled his prose by the assumption of an oracular, fulminating, and ejaculatory style of utterance. It belittled him in the eyes of his contemporaries and tends more and more to discredit him in the judgment of posterity. It makes it necessary, even for many who are most completely captivated by his genius, to explain and condone, to admire through an obscuring veil of restrictions, and often despite the protests of their better judgment. They are driven to divorce the expression from the matter, and the image from the doctrine, and the work from the man, and, in the end, to view these magnificent powers, shamed by unworthy motives, as they would view a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear, with a half-amused mixture of wonder and scorn. Indeed, when the egoistic strain is reenforced by the oracular one, they can only ask themselves: "Can we accept as a teacher or a prophet a man who sees on the whole vault of heaven only the Brocken-specter of his own soul? Must not all our admiration for the man's talent enclose within it an ineffaceable core of contempt?" (F. W. H. Myers).

This omnipresent grain of sand renders unpalatable for some even the finest fruits of Hugo's genius. The magic, the power, the unmistakable stamp of inspiration are there, but the moment the reader feels

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this bit of gravel crunch under his teeth, the spell is broken and he makes a wry face. Is he wrong? Faguet has said that to enjoy Hugo's poetry it is necessary to forget the poet—and he admits that Hugo has made this by no means easy. Boileau would have considered it impossible.

*En vain l'esprit est plein d'une noble vigueur,  
Le vers se sent toujours des bassesses du cœur.*

And Boileau is in the right. Hugo spent a lifetime in ingeniously weaving himself into the texture of his work. Can we hope to ravel him out again and have any pattern left? Can we turn a deaf ear to all that he says of himself and a receptive ear to what more poetic matter he intercalates? Can we forget that Narcissus is our guide beside the stream of Helicon, when at every second step he plucks us by the elbow and bids us stop to admire his reflection in its waters? What is left of poetry so suffused as Hugo's is with the personality of the poet, if we must ruthlessly distil away the suffusion? Images, pictures, feats of style, resonant music, the magic of cunning artistry remain, but the soul is gone. This abstractive process can not be justified. The real essence of poetry, the emotion that is purified by its own intensity till it achieves at least a fragmentary insight into the mystery of love and death, the vision that becomes spiritualized by its own persistent efforts to seize that perfect beauty which austere transcends the reach of the mere carnal senses—all this is profoundly and intimately personal, and it is these absolutely personal elements that we really abstract from great poetry, not to throw aside but to cherish. To make us in any real sense co-partners in his highest moods, the poet must in truth forget himself, but we cannot in our turn forget the poet and regard as purely impersonal artistry what is on the contrary the quintessence of sincere human experience, what makes a great book not simply a book but "the precious life-blood of a noble spirit." We are right in demanding that a truly great poet be himself "a true poem." How then can we feel that a poet is successful in this most intimately personal of all the arts, if it have left on himself so little stamp of its nobleness that we must count him an unwelcome intruder in his own poetry?

The poet who must be thus abstracted from his work and ejected from the very edifice that he is building, is not a noble spirit but an obtrusive one, is not the builder of a temple but the founder of a theater. His art is not a true and significant reflection of life, but



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only a moving-picture show. The lights and shadows that flicker in brilliant fantasticality against a background which they neither clarify nor irradiate may indeed entertain us prodigiously, but they can not appease and console us, they can not humanly help us.

Of our greater English poets, those whom we think of as poets rather than as artists, and who for many a spirit wandering in new and lonely paths of thought have, through "long study and deep love," become spiritual guides and masters, such as the great Mantuan was for Dante,—of these it may truthfully be said that their personality is as dear to us as their work, and is even an indissoluble part of it. Their character is half of their genius. They themselves rise with their inspiration; there is no invidious interval between the man and his talent. Behind their shifting emotions there is a constant mood; they do not indulge in wild and whirling words, in feverish dreams. They do not follow after the will-o'-the-wisps of passion, heedless whithersoever they lead. We never question their sincerity; we never doubt their elevation. Their words have a reassuring sanity and a noble unity that dominate all variations and dissolve all contradictions.

But who can maintain that in Hugo, when he deals with themes of equal dignity and seriousness, we find the same ring of truth, the same satisfying stamp imparted by a great personality or by a noble character? He indeed affected all this, but no affectation is more difficult to sustain, more easy to detect—or more exasperating to endure. We must descend to a lower plane when we turn from our favorite English poets to Hugo. If we cannot with Faguet forget his personality, must we not with Brunetière see in his faults, in his egotism, in his pride, in his blindness, the very fountain-head of his poetry? "Nothing," says this critic, "is sadder, yet nothing seems more true."

Abundantly endowed in his own birthright with many of the most brilliant gifts for honestly achieving the crown of fame, he so greedily coveted its possession and so hated the thought of seeing any brother-poet nearer the throne than himself, that he insisted on prematurely usurping it, on setting the crown on his head with his own hands, and on maintaining it there by any means, no matter how undignified or how unworthy. We see him, all through his long career, sending out his thoughts as hourly spies on all the shifting events of the day; wheedling, intimidating, or intriguing, according as hollow phrases, or shifty cunning, or simulated sublimities could cheat his friends or silence his enemies or further his interests. We see him surrounding himself with the mockery of a court by royally flattering every starvel-

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ing author or obsequious parasite that would consent to bow down and to fawn; we see him hating and denouncing all honester men who dared to mingle a word of judicious censure with their praise; we see him accepting noise for glory, and notoriety for fame, daily and hourly strutting and masquerading in tinsel, arrogating divine right of kingship before God and man, and so magnifying his just claims and so wantonly abusing his magnificent gifts that to many an ear the false notes in his work almost drown the true ones, and the poet himself, with all his genius, ends by seeming the most complete and perfect example, among so many that the world of letters has to offer, of the charlatan of genius. One can in the end only say of this spoiled god what Mme. de Staël said of one of her contemporaries: "He was a man of ability and imagination, but so dominated by self-love that he lived in perpetual astonishment at his own genius instead of laboring to perfect himself."

## CHAPTER II

### THE POET'S MISSION

Je l'avais toujours lu en art pour l'art.

FAGUET

**T**AINE, with characteristic French logic, found a large part of his formula for explaining genius in the *faculté maîtresse*. Such a formula, however inadequate when applied to very great or even very classic poets, would, as a rule, seem fairly adequate in the case of Hugo, as in the case of most romanticists. The reason is plain: in them, the master faculty, instead of being rationally subordinated to serve as a part of the whole, is on the contrary arbitrarily over-cultivated, so that a state of hypertrophic enlargement ensues. The poet's art, which plumes itself above all on its spontaneity, is in reality very largely an example of narrow determinism. Hugo's poetry, which comes so near to being an exclusive product of his picturesque imagination, is so determined thereby in its main features that, with all its surface play of mood and theme, it readily falls into the category of art for art's sake. Yet this is the very formula that Hugo himself most vigorously denounced and ridiculed, all the time supposing himself to be a shining example of those literary virtues to which such a theory is most fundamentally hostile. This, at first sight, may not seem very plain and requires demonstration.

Did Hugo conceive art as related to life, and as a part of it? Did he consider it as a means to an end, and hence a human activity that must be rationalized in order to have vital significance? Or did he conceive it as irresponsible, as having its end in itself, as self-generated and self-governing? Did he, as the romanticists generally have done, think of it as something independent of all rules, and therefore essentially irrational? Was he a continuator of Rousseau, a romantic showman, in whose show the chief attraction was himself? Did he use art as a circuitous and doubly flattering form of self-worship? Was he, like the paladin of Catholicism, Chateaubriand, a religious-literary dilettante, a *soi-disant* Christian artist who had set up his easel at the Cathedral door? And finally, did he exploit humanitarianism, ultimately his favorite theme, for its facile pathos, its demagogic

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appeal, its boundless rhetorical possibilities, and for the delightful privilege it brings to the aristocratic poet, that of looking down, now like a god, and now like a blessed messenger of the gods, on the mass of brother beings surging below him?

If the master faculty of a poet be a picturesque imagination, as Hugo's was, coupled with a style brilliantly adequate for its complete expression, as Hugo's likewise was, nothing can save him from being *nolens volens* a great practitioner of art for art's sake, except the possession of a great character, a character powerful enough to discipline and direct the *faculté maîtresse*, in short to unseat it from its throne and make it no longer a *faculté maîtresse*, but an obedient servant of the spirit. The resultant work may be less brilliant in many ways (Sophocles is less brilliant than Swinburne), but it will be far more sound, and so more truly civilizing, less dazzling, less amusing, but more edifying. For such austere aim at balance at the obvious cost of complete self-expression (for to the uncompromising romanticist the ego is on the whole the real center of art), Hugo decidedly lacked the wisdom and the strength of character. Self-sacrifice, and one may add self-culture, is the last and least part of his concern. If it is possible, as Brunetière asserts, for us to know Hugo better than he ever knew himself, it is because he never really repressed any part of himself: we have all the data that he had—and can study him impartially.

In his own violent repudiation of this classification as a practitioner of art for art's sake, Hugo only offers his critics another opportunity for feeling that "it is possible for them to know him better than he ever knew himself." "Those who have claimed that I practiced art for art's sake have talked nonsense: nobody more than myself has pursued art for the sake of society and of humanity. I have always kept this ideal in mind, and I have always known what I wished to do. *Art for art's sake*—one can read my writings from the first page to the last without finding these words. It is the very contrary that is written in my whole work, and, let me insist, in my whole life."

The discussion of these points has been still further obscured by Hugo's reiterated insistence on the sacred mission of the poet, and by the humanitarian note running through his work almost from the beginning. That in all this he rather deceived himself than sought to deceive his reader is no doubt fairly true; though it can hardly be maintained that there is not an element of more or less voluntary charlatanism pervading his work, for, having once assumed an attitude, he consciously emphasized it.



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Hugo's mission—a great deal has been said upon this subject, mainly by himself. There can hardly be found in his work two successive pages in which he does not hint his mission, nor three in which he does not proclaim it, nor four in which he does not by sublime attitudinizing try to incarnate it. He was unwilling to be numbered among the poets who have none, and who, as Théophile Gautier so cheerfully consented to do, amuse the public without edifying it. He insists on his superiority to Gautier:

Voix pareille à la sienne, et plus haute pourtant,  
Comme la grande mer qui parlerait au fleuve.

His vanity rebelled against the thought of appearing before posterity as only the idle singer of an empty day,

Un poète, un passant, une inutile voix.

He was unwilling to accept the secondary rank inevitably assigned by an ungrateful reading public to those who merely amuse it. He aspired to the higher rank assigned by a grateful unreading public to those who edify it. On the other hand, he was no less unwilling to attempt the labor, not very promising in his case, it must be confessed, of serious thought and of strenuously achieved wisdom. So he ran the inevitable risk, when he attempted higher flights, of often ceasing to be amusing without becoming edifying. Such poems as "Dieu," or "La Fin de Satan" are at best only indifferently diverting. Hugo readily understood that a poet who merely entertains his audience, whether by imaginative virtuosity, as he did, or by passionate lyricism, as did Musset, commands a restricted, even though intense, admiration. He is, indeed, capable of saying to Juliette:

Ma pensée, urne profonde,  
Vase à la douce liqueur,  
Qui pourrait emplir le monde,  
Ne veut remplir que ton cœur!

But the very words in which he formulates this ideal convey a side-long glance at that larger audience which, if put to the proof, he would be so reluctant to renounce.

Que m'importe cette foule,  
Qui fait sa rumeur au loin!

he adds, but we know only too well that its distant noise was as the life-breath in his nostrils, and that he could never allow the distance

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to grow great enough to drown the delicious buzz or even to obscure the reëchoed syllabication of his own applauded name.

Hugo, who can, with equal good-faith, sing every side of every theme, has pictured very charmingly the cloistered poet who lives in meditative remoteness from the world, the habitant of

"The lovely cottage in the guardian nook."

He bids the poet hide his life and diffuse his thought.

Toi, sois heureux dans l'ombre. En ta vie ignorée,  
Dans ta tranquillité vénérable et sacrée,  
Reste réfugié, penseur mystérieux!

But in another poem (written in the same month) he formulates the contrary doctrine:

Je vous aime, ô sainte nature!  
Je voudrais m'absorber en vous;  
Mais, dans ce siècle d'aventure,  
Chacun, hélas! se doit à tous.

This divinely imposed humanitarian mission of the poet is proclaimed by Hugo so repeatedly—several thousand times, says Lemaître—that his reader almost comes to believe in it. Perhaps even the poet did. Be that as it may, he exaggerates it in characteristically romantic fashion. In the *Odes*, at the age of twenty-one, he already asseverates that the poet's eye

Entrevoit plus de mystères sombres  
Que les morts effrayés n'en lisent, dans les ombres,  
Sous la pierre de leur tombeau!

More than a decade later, he writes in the monody on his brother's death:

J'ai d'austères plaisirs. Comme un prêtre à l'église,  
Je rêve à l'art qui charme, à l'art qui civilise,  
Qui change l'homme un peu.

From this time forward, he defines the poet above all as a prophet:

La terre me disait: Poète!  
Le ciel me répétait: Prophète!  
Marche! parle! enseigne! bénis!  
Penche l'urne des chants sublimes!

Yet, although the verses are innumerable in which Hugo proclaims the mission of the poet, his definition of this mission is always couched

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in the vaguest of rhetorical phraseology. At one moment he seems to confound it with the work of the practical politician and the social reformer, at another with that of the religious teacher. If, on occasion, it approaches distincter formulation, it is very much at the expense both of its prophetic significance and of its more immediate and apprehensible values.

Pierre à pierre, en songeant aux vieilles mœurs éteintes,  
Sous la société qui chancelle à tous vents,  
Le penseur reconstruit ces deux colonnes saintes,  
Le respect des vieillards et l'amour des enfants.

This certainly seems a singular conception of the tasks devolving on the inspired thinker. On the whole, however, it is toward something far higher than all this, it is toward the rôle—or the attitude—of the Hebrew prophet that Hugo leans. He is

Le songeur qui s'enflamme  
A mesure qu'il se détruit, . . .  
L'homme farouche,  
Ivre d'ombre et d'immensité.

Hugo loved to picture himself as one of the major prophets—and even emitted from time to time certain not altogether equivocal hints of archangelic and even godlike potentialities (just as Voltaire, a more terrestrial and grubbing spirit, was humorously accused of aspiring to the cardinalate).

Avant d'être sur cette terre,  
Je sens que jadis j'ai plané;  
J'étais l'archange solitaire,  
Et mon malheur, c'est d'être né.

He pictures himself

Aux pieds la foudre, au cœur des plaies,  
L'épine au front.

There is unfortunately an inherent contradiction between this ultra-romantic notion of the poet, which sets him apart from humanity (since even the bourgeois are human), and the humanitarian conception of the poet's rôle, which unites him in close-knit bonds of love with his fellow-men.

What wonder that the discreeter among Hugo's auditors in the light of this contradiction saw in him only the agile virtuoso, the calculating artist who seemed, with the hero of Barbey d'Aurevilly, to be for-

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ever saying to his reader: "My dear sir, men—like me—have from all eternity been created only to astonish men—like you"? They were all the more astonished that one who so emphasized his godlike difference from themselves should set up as a poet truly representative of humanity at large, and they only smiled knowingly when he cried: "In speaking to you of myself I am speaking to you of yourselves. How can you fail to feel this? How can you be so mad as to believe that I am not you?"

Summarizing his utterances, it seems that Hugo contemns the populace, despises the bourgeois, hates the rich, views with profound suspicion and dislike all the professional, learned, and governing classes—and loves the people—from whom he regards himself as radically and divinely different. The poet is not for him a man more representative and more comprehensively human; he is a wild creature transcending and ignoring all common standards, a prey to inexplicable inspirations, his head a furnace seething with extraordinary visions and myriad pictures, his tumultuous heart swelling with superhuman passions, a being Titanic rather than human, and delighting like a very Jove to

Ride in the whirlwind and direct the storm;

yet it is his function to be serene, contemplative and perennially profound, an ever-flowing fountain of celestial wisdom, a never-dying torch hung on high to light the upward march of humanity—in short, Hugo's ideal of the poet is a Byron noisily executing the mission of a Wordsworth. But it must by this time be fairly evident that Hugo, in speaking of his mission, is moving—as usual—in the domain of rhetoric, not in that of ideas.

In thus defining the poet, Hugo thought he was defining himself; in thus outlining the poet's functions, he was issuing the programme of the matters he purposed to deal with in his poetry—and in truth, it is a faithful enough table of contents: the great bulk of his work is prompted by this mistaken ambition, and strives, with the rhetorical and ethical resources of French romanticism, to rival at the same time all the greatest poets and all the major prophets, although Hugo shared neither the humanity of Shakespeare, nor the purity of Wordsworth, nor the spirituality of Israel. From his pictures of the poet, alternately robed in light and draped in thunder-clouds, posing as prophet and avenger, and usually clutching a handful of thunderbolts, a being ter-



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rible and sublime, wearing an archangelic frown and a frightful diadem of serpents, it must be fairly apparent even to those who doubt his edifying qualities that Hugo really has quite legitimate claims to be enrolled among the writers who amuse us. Shall we go on and say, with M. Desjardins, that he is really peerless only when he consents to be as innocent of significance as a Turkish rug? It is to be feared that we must, for in these modern days we are little given to faith in a poet's claim (even though frequently reiterated) to divine inspiration:

Dieu dictait, j'écrivais,—

especially if the claimant exhibit a far more robust faith in the divineness of his mission than in the divinity that confers it. "Let him believe in God or in the gods, in Pluto or in Satan, in Canidia or in Morgana, or in nothing. The poet is free," Hugo says, in a more unguarded mood.

It is not always an easy matter to discover the native trend of a poet's work, the primordial inspiration that under all attitudes and disguises continues to animate, and, unknown possibly even to himself, to direct it. We may perhaps most easily find this in Hugo by turning back to his earlier works, those which proceed more immediately from inner impulse and which are less subservient to the demands of the public and to the caprices of the times. Let us turn to his first great success, to the "Orientales." Here, indeed, he has found himself and is perfect master of his instrument. What is the nature of his inspiration? It is that of the pure artist, of the virtuoso enamoured of his own virtuosity and dazzled by the richness of his own temperamental vein. We are in the presence of a magnificent tyrant of words and syllables, of a superb master of strophes, rhythms and rhymes, of a poet who is at once a painter and a musician. He creates images, evokes visions, revels in colors, aligns adjectives, and above all, interminably, without intermission, he paints. Ideas refuse to come to him, and he refuses to go in search of them. There is such a striking absence of them throughout the volume that readers unfamiliar with the poet might suspect that they were purposely excluded. Even the commonplaces of Philhellenism find but the most jejune and perfunctory expression. It has served to bring the poet to the Orient. Once there, the charm of the country makes him forget the motive of his errand. He had come to damn the Turk and to sing the Greek—

but he finds that the Turk is the better subject, and he sings almost exclusively of the harem and the houris, and the picturesque scenes and barbaric passions that centre in Stamboul. Byron sang the Orient as an *enfant perdu* of liberty, as one who had seen and understood and loved all that was consecrated by Greek traditions. Hugo goes to the East the *fiancé* of the Greek Muse, but no sooner has he arrived than he falls in love with the Turkish matron, the *Hôtesse Arabe*.

Hugo sounds the key-note of his Orientalism in his very first poem: *Le Feu du Ciel*. It is a long succession of splendid descriptions; the sea, the sky, the desert, Egypt, Babylon, Sodom and Gomorrah. In less than a hundred lines we encounter twenty-three colors! *Ut pictura poesis!*

Another example: *Les Fêtes du Sérail*. Hugo describes a seraglio brilliant with lights on a festive night, its walls adorned with six thousand dis severed heads, three of which successively discourse—mere pegs to hang a poem on!

Another example: *Malédiction*. It is a blood-curdling imprecation—but the poet does not confide to us either the subject or the occasion of this gratuitous but superb display of rhetoric. The occasion is perhaps evident enough: it is an exercise in versification.

Another example: *Les Tronçons du Serpent*. A serpent has been cut into bits, but its eloquent head opens a fiery mouth and emits a volley of philosophical reflections.

This is of course not the real Orient. It is only that languid ripple which, starting from the Golden Horn, spread westward till it broke on the shore-line of the Occidental consciousness: it is the Orient seen from the Batignolles: turbaned Turks, piratical Greeks, lovely odalisks, glittering scimitars, comparadjis, spahis, timariots, bloody Janissaries, black eunuchs, scented harems, azure seas with women in sacks splashing into them from the windows of marble palaces, wars, murders, massacres—and pictures!

And Greece? you ask. Ah! That is another story: if you are not satisfied with The War-cry of the Mufti, The Grief of the Pacha, The Favorite Sultana, The Dervish, The Turkish March, Sultan Achmet, Sara in the Bath, or The Red-haired Nourmahal, then you evidently are what Hugo was not, an incurable Philhellene; and though even here you may find Navarino and Canaris versified, you had, on the whole, better turn from Hugo's *turquerie pittoresque* to the poetry of Byron, especially if you want genuine emotion and some poetry in which there is still a shadowy reminiscence of the Attic Muse, in-

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stead of pure art for art's sake—but, let us not forget to repeat, superb as such.

What is so plainly true of the "Orientales," is, despite deceptive cross-currents, true of all Hugo's poetry. The detailed study of his work, from first to last, will prove, if it proves anything, that he lacked the depth and the seriousness that animate the genuinely contemplative poet. He was too little detached from self, and above all was too much absorbed in the glittering treasure-trove of his vagrant fantasy, to assist patiently at the slow processes by which wisdom is distilled from experience, or to admit of the dove-tailing of even the most exiguous of heaven-sent inspirations among the temporalities that forever obtruded on his day. When he touches those things that should be handled with simplicity and reverence or else not be handled at all, he does it with an uncomprehending hardness of touch that makes the truly reverent man, even the mere man of taste, wince with pain. He treats the most awe-inspiring themes with an almost surgical unconcern and with an unconscious irreverence that makes it only too plain that he is not in earnest. What he worships is ornament; what he seeks is imagery. He is only diving for pearls in these deep still waters which he so noisily disturbs. He finds his pearls, indeed, large and plentiful, and he has hung them in triple and quadruple bands around the necks of all the moral and religious platitudes which in giddy procession dance down the long series of his works, to bedazzle us with their scintillating splendors.

Hugo is never sufficiently mastered by emotion, or uplifted by insight, to rise from the rhetorical to the natural, and art without nature at its core is never sincere.

Mon cœur gronde et bouillonne, et je sens lentement,  
Couvercle soulevé par un flot écumant,  
S'entr'ouvrir mon front plein de rêves.

That, alas, is Hugo's normal tone! Even when he sings of God and immortality, he always allows himself a sidelong squint out of the corner of his eye to watch the effect on his audience.

The discussion of Hugo's divine mission may be summed up in the fitting words of his biographer, M. Mabilleau: "From this conviction, which soon became rooted in him and which became the first article of his personal creed, derives the pontifical serenity in which he affects henceforth to wrap himself, and which is at bottom nothing more than an attitude deemed useful for his glory." As another student

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of Hugo's work says: "It seemed to Victor Hugo that he would increase his prestige with the multitude in standing before them as the thinker who knows the great secret."<sup>1</sup>

The effect was not always happy. "Qui fait l'ange fait la bête," says Pascal. Hugo had for some time been proclaiming his prophetic mission and in poem after poem had thrown solemn draperies of immaculate white around his spirit, when suddenly, before the amazed and amused eyes of his Parisian spectators, the poet in the flesh leaped down from his pedestal into the arms of a black-eyed actress and absconded with her so incontinently that his prophetic mantle remained emptily clutched in the hands of an irreverent public. He had undermined his own authority, and both his readers and his critics refused to see in him an austere Isaiah or a Daniel come to judgment. Their irreverent attitude was but accentuated when, a dozen years later, the prophet was saved from prosecution only by the personal intervention of the king because, after preaching universal love, he was surreptitiously (and contrary to his usual custom) practicing what he preached.

His opportunity came to him a third time, however, in the years of exile when he could discreetly hide his personal life, wrap Juliette in a Jersey mist, and, lifting his own head high above the same, retintone his old-time oracular and prophetic strains.

"I live in this vast oceanic dream-world, I am becoming little by little a somnambulist of the sea, . . . and in the presence of this gigantic living thought into which I plunge, I end by being no longer anything but a sort of witness of God."

That is the tone habitually assumed, even in his private correspondence, by a flesh and blood poet living in a city-mansion and not in a cave in the desert, living on French cookery and not on locusts and wild honey, and—thus report has it—so frequently interlarding his sublime colloquies with deity by scandalous interludes with demi-mondaines of every kind and degree, that the pious islanders (in their colloquies with God) prayed for the speedy removal of this standing menace to the morals and manners of Guernsey.

To far-away Paris, however, the prophet, perched on his beetling crag, loomed on the horizon ever more and more like a genuine prophet of old, and, his Hebrew competitors being somewhat out of fashion in the land of Voltaire, he seemed to many the one true prophet, especially to the poor and the disinherited, the *misérables*

<sup>1</sup> P. Berret: *Philosophie de V. Hugo*, p. 37.



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whose cause the growingly socialistic poet now sang louder and louder.

As regards the humanitarian motive in his work, Hugo, at first sight and on the surface, comes out rather better than in his rôle of interpreter of the ways of God to man. In common with most of us, he found man a trifle nearer than God—despite his frequent hints to the contrary. There is, besides, a portion of his nature, not as broad as a church-door nor as deep as a well, in which there abides a certain tenuous sympathy for humanity. When he is not too much preoccupied with personal interests, too deeply plunged in the rhyming dictionary, too much irritated by the critics, or too much absorbed by woman in the concrete, he is not incapable of a certain kindly feeling for man in the abstract—though remaining all the time exasperatingly well aware of the literary possibilities of such a sentiment. It is precisely this intrusive literary preoccupation that makes him here again abandon nature for art. The humanitarian note in his work, quite as much as the divine and prophetic one, is a forced note. He always insists on seeing humanity, not as others see it, in its sane and normal aspects, but in its most picturesque guise, in its most dramatically moving attitudes, in its wild and exceptional experiences. He dehumanizes humanity in order to give it the requisite artistic distortion; like Parrhasius, he tortures his model that he may give an added artistic touch to his picture. The world does not present itself to him in the guise of living and sensitive forces working out experiments in conduct, but as a procession of picturesque figures to be seized by the sketcher in their most histrionic poses.

J'ai réhabilité le bouffon, l'histrion,  
Tous les damnés humains, Triboulet, Marion,  
Le laquais, le forçat et la prostituée;  
Et j'ai collé ma bouche à toute âme tuée.

"Humanity reduced to an immense apocalyptic Punch and Judy show," as Lemaître wittily put it—what is this, after all, but a somewhat questionable manifestation of art for art's sake?

The Napoleon-cult of Hugo affords further confirmation of this lack of direction in his work. To view humanity with a prevailingly picturesque motive, and with an incidental aversion from the prosaic and the natural, has its penalties. Thus viewed, what figure could appeal so strongly, even to our humanitarian poet, as that of the least humanitarian but most brilliantly theatrical apparition on the stage of history, Napoleon?

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"What is the future that Hugo dreams of?" says M. Dupuy. "He covets the crown of Dante, only because he dares not aspire to the scepter of Napoleon." Napoleon demoralized the French nation for half a century. He represented the apotheosis of unscrupulous ambition so alluringly that he infected half the men of genius of Hugo's time. They conceived themselves invested with a providential mission, and often, like Hugo, after first exalting genius as the manifestation of a noble and virtuous soul, they ended by seeing in it the splendid incarnation of superior power.

Et vous, fléaux de Dieu, qui sait si le génie  
N'est pas une de vos vertus?

(Lamartine)

This romantic cynicism was the natural outcome of the tendency to see in the man of genius a being superbly different from the rest of mankind, a rival of the very greatest names past and present. "Shall the age that has had its Charlemagne not be great enough to have also its Shakespeare?" Hugo asks significantly. He accordingly throws out hints of an intellectual French empire dominating the world by a literary papacy—and he makes it fairly plain who might most worthily occupy this high eminence about the year 1830: "Let the poet come then . . . the man of destiny who, combining one day with Napoleon according to the mysterious algebra of Providence, is to give complete to the future the general formula of the nineteenth century."

The poet, flattered by such confrontations, worshipped himself in his uniqueness and arrogated every kind of privilege in comparison with and at the expense of the much despised humanity that surrounded him and which stupidly failed to understand and share these sacred rites.

Et ma lyre aux fibres d'acier  
A passé sur ces âmes viles,  
Comme sur le pavé des villes  
L'ongle résonnant du coursier.

Hugo installs this aristocratic cult of genius alongside of his democratic theory of humanitarianism, and so we get the curious spectacle of a poet at once broadly humanitarian and narrowly chauvinistic. We see him, one eye weeping over the unjust conquest of Poland, the other eye glistening at the vision of Europe become a vassal to the French, and of the Corsican returning from his campaigns loaded down

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with *spolia opima*, with the lion of Saint-Mark from Venice, the Laocoon from the Vatican, and the old masters unhooked from the walls of the imperial palaces of Spain and Italy.

Et puis il revenait avec la grande armée,  
Encombrant de butin sa France bien-aimée.

Hugo's chosen hero, his god, is the general who pointed out to his soldiers the rich spoils of Northern Italy and bade them fight for plunder.

Thus while still the titular poet of the ruling dynasty, and while still boasting of having written a book in which the name of the Bourbons figured on every page, he has already been irresistibly drawn into the vortex of the great epic personality of the century and is confounding his prophetic function with the proclaiming of the greatness and glory of the Empire, and this moreover to an age which was in general wiser than the poet, and which it was a part of his mission to inoculate with his own fatal enthusiasm. Brunetière says: "While round about him, not only the political men of the Restoration and of the time of Louis-Philippe, but the poets themselves, Lamartine and Vigny, Barbier in his *Iambes*, and how many others, were heaping their maledictions on the name of Bonaparte, Hugo alone, or almost alone, had seen and had wished to see only the *éclat* of the great Napoleonic epic." We find him

A l'empereur tombé dressant dans l'ombre un temple.

To sing Napoleon and his victories actually seems to him a mission!

Car j'ai ma mission; car, armé d'une lyre,  
Plein d'hymnes irrités ardents à s'épancher,  
Je garde le trésor des gloires de l'empire;  
Je n'ai jamais souffert qu'on osât y toucher!

This most questionable apostolate, especially when interpreted, as it is by Hugo, in a spirit of imperialistic militarism unrelieved by moral considerations, is indeed a strange one for a contemplative poet professionally dwelling in solitary communion with God. Tennyson was shocked by Hugo's famous utterance "*Napoléon gênait Dieu.*" The embarrassment in question never extended to Napoleon's poet. He continued to turn without any sense of incongruity from the rapt ecstasies of prophetic vision which culminated in the "Contemplations" to the terrene Pindarism which celebrated the exploits of the great athlete of the battle-field; he continued singing to one clear harp in divers tones the austere mysteries of religion and the noisy glories

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of Marengo and Austerlitz, Eylau and Champaubert, while, with eyes well guarded by patriotic blinders, his Pegasus was driven rapidly past the fields of defeat and rout, only stopping a moment at Waterloo to neigh defiance at England, to kick out with the true old-time viciousness at Hudson Lowe, and to hint that, even if possibly Napoleon may be said to have lost the battle, the English certainly did not win it.

Quand je lis Waterloo, je prononce Austerlitz—

for, as he says elsewhere, making a luminous distinction:

La France mérite Austerlitz, et l'Empire  
Waterloo.

In the same vein of heroic fustian, the humanitarian poet tells us how Napoleon

Ravit le Kremlin au Czar Pierre,  
L'Escorial à Charles-Quint!

quite forgetting that to the impartial Muse of history the patriotism that drove Napoleon from the ashes of Moscow, and his brother from the palace of the Escorial, was far more truly heroic and far more worthy of poetic consecration than the brutal militarism which Hugo preferred to sing, partly because it was a key to wider popularity than disinterested song could bring him, and partly because the superficial splendors of the theme seduced his theatrical genius.

Any poet not simply practicing art for art's sake would instinctively have felt in Napoleon the arch-enemy of poetry, because he was the arch-enemy of that finer spirit of morality of which the poet is one of the authentic interpreters. Viewing in that light this herald of an iron age, he might have seen in him the despotic usurper that Lamartine saw, the nature in which the moral man is simply absent, the sixteenth century condottiere born into the nineteenth that Taine saw, the giant who did all that in him lay to live and thrive without moral principles, that Emerson saw. But for Hugo the big wars that make ambition virtue were a richer lyric theme than the less stirring victories of peace. "There is not a single successful peace-poem in the whole work of Hugo," said the patriot-poet Péguy. For Hugo Napoleon was simply the most magnificent subject for dithyrambic effusion that the world had to offer.

Il verse à mon esprit le souffle créateur.



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So he soon repented of his earlier attitude of ferocious rejection and hailed him as

Napoléon, soleil dont je suis le Memnon!

remaining faithful until his humanitarian old age led him again to renounce his long allegiance on the ground that "a cannon-ball travels only 600 leagues per hour; light travels 10.000 leagues per second. Such is the superiority of Jesus Christ over Napoleon." It is true that later still Hugo outgrew Christ also, and tardily but thoroughly learned to look for light only within. Is it not evident that M. Mabilleau is right when he says: "Political and social questions interested Hugo only in so far as they touched his imagination,"—which is but another way of saying that Hugo lived for art alone, and unwarrantably meddled with other men's affairs as reformer and apostle only because *le geste est beau*, because humanitarianism, militarism, chauvinism, and religiosity all lend themselves readily to æsthetic exploitation. A truly humane poet, not intent only on art for art's sake, would never have found Napoleon "venerable," or have seen in him a "*grand crucifié*," or a "magnanimous and serene exile," or a "great and good soul," and would never have said to him:

"Tu domines notre âge, ange ou démon, qu'importe?"

Finally, abandoning humanity, what shall we say of Hugo as an interpreter of nature? Does he here, in a cool and quiet world abstracted from human agitations and interests and their perilously personal solicitations, escape into a region of calm objectivity and of impersonal inspiration? Far from it: he carries his ego with all its limitations, unchastened and unpurged, into this world also. Sirius and Aldebaran rise and sink in unison with the splendor and the occlusion of Hugo's private destinies, and the Second Empire is a dull interregnum in the astronomic world, as lack-lustre as the French Parnassus itself in the poet's protracted exile. It could not well be otherwise. To the poet wanting in reverence and insight in dealing with the supernatural, wanting in sober intelligence and serious goodwill in dealing with man, and unable consequently to translate the universe in which he is imprisoned into either transcendental or human symbolism,—what can it, thus isolated, offer except mere plastic materials for artistic manipulation, a chaos of pictures and images? In the very poem in which Hugo denounces the idea that poetry is only an

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elegant diversion he goes on to tell the poet to turn to the outspread spectacle of nature and to interpret it as—painting and music!

Thus, in spite of his own aims and efforts, from whatever side we view it, the essential motive underlying all Hugo's work remains decorative and rhetorical, because the limitations of his personality condemned his brilliant powers always to play on the surface of things, to seize their external aspects only, to picture them as they mirror themselves in the eye, or as they deform and reform themselves in the perpetually shifting glass of fancy, or as they magnify and glorify themselves in the mists of a wonder-working imagination and in the heat of a super-excited rhetorical faculty that handles words with something of the same superstitious faith in their ultimate efficacy that thrills the Sibyl in her magical incantations.

No poet has given us less matter with more art; none has stitched a more gorgeous edging of *dentelle* on a more vulgar *torchon*; he is a poet in acts of prowess eminent and great exploits, but of true virtue void. A great decorative artist, impervious to thought and only superficially stirred by feeling, resolutely gilding commonplaces with the splendors of style or translating man and nature into strangely arbitrary but often imposing and sometimes unsurpassable fantasies and pictures—that is perhaps a complete definition of Victor Hugo.

## CHAPTER III

### IMAGINATION

So full of shapes is fancy  
That it alone is high fantastical.  
*Twelfth Night*

Il sait l'art  
D'évoquer le démon, la stryge, l'égrégoire.  
*Légende des Siècles.*

THE characteristic which first strikes the reader of Hugo's poetry and which continues most to impress him to the end is its pervadingly imaginative turn. Intellect and sentiment were for Hugo little more than channels of transmission through which the phenomena of life and of the world around him flowed surely and steadily down to the all-receiving hollow of his imagination. Here all things settled, gathering about them a tropically rich vegetation of ornament that sometimes transfigured and sometimes distorted and sometimes completely buried them under a growth of parasitic magnificence. Those who find the measure of Hugo's genius in the luxuriance of this vegetation are apt to echo the verdict of his most admiring critics and to see in him one of the very greatest of poets, ancient or modern. Those, on the other hand, who consider the slightness of the resistance opposed by any rival power to this all-invading flora are more apt to be impressed by the essential poetic impotence of a body of poetry whose substance is so hopelessly invalidated by what should be its accessories. The truth is that Hugo's poetry can appear really satisfying to those alone who ask of poetry only sensuous effects, only pictures and music and flowers, to those who seek only

L'imagination, tapageuse à cent voix,

for whom, as for himself, poetry is an expression of art for art's sake.

Hugo is a pictorial poet with marvelous musical and rhetorical resources. His poetry is all derived from the eye, and it is all addressed to the eye—by way of the ear. It may all be explained in terms of optics and acoustics. The substance is all made up of things seen, and the manner is wholly governed by sound. It is a magic-lantern

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show with orchestral accompaniment—both superb. Recall Shakespeare's lines

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

That is metaphysically imaginative. Compare Hugo on the same theme:

Un ange vit un jour des hommes dans la nuit;  
Il leur cria du haut de la sereine sphère:  
Attendez, je vous vais chercher de la lumière.  
Il revint apportant dans sa main la pitié.

That is physically imaginative. The conception is that of a painter; all is seen and treated from without. What is important for Hugo is, as in opera, that the angel be seen and heard, what he says is only so much libretto. The idea is emptied of its metaphysical content.

This implies that Hugo's imagination is of that secondary kind which serves for decorative purposes, that it is not of the constructive and sympathetic kind which enables the artist to create and to interpret, the kind which, instead of being dissociated from intellect and feeling, is a heightened expression of them both. This is so little the case that Hugo is hardly at all a poet of humanity, but is essentially a poet of the physical world. His endless wealth of figures is astonishingly deficient in humane elements, in that deeper poetic beauty which comes from the infusion of the work with what is most exquisitely and intimately individual in the poet's self, making us feel the presence of a something unique in its essence, of an indissoluble spiritual bond between the work and the human experience in which it had its ultimate origin. Hugo's imagery has no necessary connection with himself, it is an impersonal product. His images are only recorded perceptions, ingenious geometrical replicas of the external outlines and surfaces of the things they describe. The poet, in his more loyal mood, has an unparalleled faculty for detecting these hidden similitudes, these latent suggestions of conformity that he so plausibly superimposes on his originals; and, in his more wayward moods, he displays in addition a most wilful ingenuity in coaxing these outlines into proximate identity wherever they overlap or fall short; and not infrequently this ingenuity is pieced out with a triumphant violence. Hugo's images are often most forced when most splendid.

How completely this teeming imagination, however, remains im-



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prisoned in the world of form and color! How lacking is the stamp of personality in these myriads of glittering images, concreted like resplendent frost-pictures on the windows of the poet's mind! He has only to wave his enchanter's wand and whole hosts of poetic similitudes leap into being, but that is all—he can not accomplish the rarer miracle of infusing souls into these bodies. For such truly creative tasks his personality was too lacking in fineness and subtlety, his insight into human nature was too slight, his perception of external nature was too purely visual. This is what condemned him to squander this fecund ebullition of imagery on the surface decoration of commonplaces, on the vulgar themes of demagoguery, on purely sensational phenomena, and on a nature which either remains only a mirrored panorama or is distorted into a strange and splendid but spiritually meaningless phantasmagoria.

Whatever Hugo sees, thinks, or feels, becomes at once matter to be transformed into imagery. Every message that is addressed to his understanding is seized in transit and is deciphered and translated into the primitive dialect of the imagination. Even the plainest matter of fact, which to all others would appear utterly abhorrent to imaginative statement, seems only to enter his mind in the guise of an image. The historian would say: The Polish revolt of 1832 was cruelly repressed by Russia. To Hugo the fact at once presents itself as a vision: in the North are vaguely heard the sinister strokes of the hammer nailing Poland down again into its coffin. Here lies the special gift of Hugo: he does not cognize things, he sees them. This is in poetry a great and even a fundamental gift—it is half of the poet's art. It is with Hugo so primary a part of his talent, one so unflagging and so omnipresent, that he has written hardly a page where we are not constrained to stop and admire its manifestation; it is this, coupled with his equally remarkable gift of style, that makes him acceptable to most readers as a really great lyric poet. It has even enabled him to overthrow what was one of the most firmly rooted traditions of French poetry, the half-prosaic timidity of its figures, which even in their farthest excursions hardly ever ventured beyond the neutral strip that lies between the territories of poetry and prose. No poet ever took more to heart the proverb: Nothing venture, nothing gain. Hugo ventures everything with magnificent recklessness. His figures are of astonishing boldness. They are the boldest not only in French poetry but in all modern poetry. What wonder then, his apologists say, that they should so often pay the penalty of over-boldness. The triumphant violence

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of his metaphors often snatches successfully at a grace which a more modest genius would have renounced as quite beyond the reach of art.

Ma maison me regarde et ne me connaît plus.

L'adieu lointain

Du pauvre mât penché parmi les lames brunes.

Of all the nineteenth century poets Hugo is perhaps the only one whose imagination really succeeded at times in rising and sustaining itself with broad sweep of wing in the region of the physical sublime—and the fault is doubtless not always his, if our eye often seems unable to follow his far flights, and if we fail to realize the boldness of his attempts except when, as now and then happens, he falls, a gasping and floundering Icarus, back to the earth that he so ambitiously disdained.

This boundless imagination, which draws all things into its own magic circle and which transforms them all, can not only penetrate into those regions that lie so far away that they remain eternally new, but it also succeeds at times in giving an absolutely new form to some of the oldest human conceptions, in renewing things which even to the earliest poets of our race must have seemed already exhausted of their metaphorical suggestiveness:

L'aube blanchit au bord de l'horizon,  
Pareille au serviteur qui le premier s'éveille  
Et, sa lampe à la main, marche dans la maison.

Could one speak of the dawn with more exquisite novelty of touch?

Hugo imagines with intensity things true or false, giving an impression of profundity to what is true and of plausibility to what is false. This is the very essence of imagination: it substitutes the impression for the fact, dispensing with the latter when it is contradictory or making it shine with the double persuasiveness of truth and beauty conjoined when enveloped in this magical raiment. But of these two kinds of magic the second alone is legitimate, the other is only a kind of prestidigitation and commands only wonder without respect. To embellish the truth with transcendent splendor is the proper function of the imagination, the power by which poetry asserts its superiority to all those categories of thought, like science and history, which do not rise above the mere fact. But to falsify the fact under a shining mist, to substitute an arbitrary dream for the fact, and to make this practice the very basis of poetry, which thus becomes, as the older critics called it, a "beautiful falsehood," this is what has led the

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student of history and science so often to scorn poetry as a mere elegant amusement. It is for the most part this illegitimate magic that Hugo practices: the fact is only his point of departure, the fancy is his goal.

What can any reader not juvenile make of such grotesque inventions as we find in the verses in which Hugo tells us that the stone with which Abel slew Cain was planted by the ghoul Isis Lilith near the Seine, and under the fecundating breath of Satan sprouted up as the Bastille? Yet such inventions are typically Hugoesque. "He has created myths," says Brunetière—and the chorus of critics repeat the eulogy without pausing to observe how arbitrary the creation usually is. Such imagery is apt not only to be a stumbling-block to the critical sense, looking for due homage to truth even in the boldest excursions of fancy, it is apt to seem also somewhat coldly remote from our sympathy and our comprehension.

Hugo's imagination, being insufficiently human, and living too exclusively in the realm of things, obeys their law, not the law of man. Hence a pervadingly alien quality in its products. They are often tropical in their luxuriance and dimensions, but they impress us as curiously exotic and remote,—not as endearingly familiar, as something forgotten that is suddenly recalled, or something lost that is suddenly rediscovered. Hugo's romantic love of strangeness led him into a cult of the far-fetched. He scorned what is the essential matter of art, even the most imaginative, the familiar. He failed to see—as the truest poets always do—that this, in its exquisite form, though near at hand, is, as it were, invisible except to the consecrated eye, that it is a shy and radiant wood-nymph that often vanishes into the mist at the threatened profanation of human approach, while the far-fetched image, on account of its flaunting boldness, is the easiest to capture.

Thus, great as is Hugo's gift of imagination, he does not possess it, it possesses him; it tyrannizes over him. He not only has an almost unexampled power of seeing things as images, but he can not see them otherwise. As soon as he has found a starting-point of resemblance between two things, he shuts his eyes to everything else. He at once goes in for what Coppée so admired in him, the *métaphore suivie*. In praising Hugo as the unique master of the *métaphore suivie*, Coppée, I fear, is speaking only as an artist and technician, fastening his attention too exclusively on ingenuity and brilliancy of detail. The most important lesson of style which the chaste classic Muse has taught us is that, even in the most inspired poetry, thought and figure

must, like unhappy lovers, kiss and part. Prolong their union, and each strives to assert itself at the expense of the other. The *métaphore suivie* is a tyrannical husband who completely suppresses his better half, the idea. This is the kind of *métaphore suivie* that Hugo always practiced—in literature as in life. He has no skill in the use of that far more complicated and subtly blended figure, in which the metaphor and the idea, during their brief contact, gracefully circle round each other in a continuously intertwining dance, so that each seems as constantly visible as the other and from all sides at the same time. But, perhaps, in discussing the dangers of the *métaphore suivie*, I am myself illustrating them. For that let us rather return to Hugo.

No matter how vast may be the dissemblances that nullify it, Hugo develops the whole suggestion of his image; he can not interrupt his metaphor. His imagination is imprisoned in its coils and can only escape by unwinding them to the last. Provided that the mere outlines of two notions visually superimpose, he assumes their identity, no matter how loudly their essential nature may cry out in protest. He is quite unconscious of the incongruities of this metaphorical match-making between high and low, between what taste sanctions and what taste reprobates.

Ah! vous raccommodez vos habits! Venez voir,  
Quand la saison commence à venter, à pleuvoir,  
Comment l'altier Pelvoux, vieillard à tête blanche,  
Sait, tout déguenillé de grêle et d'avalanche,  
Mettre à ses cieux troués une pièce d'azur,  
Et croisant les genoux, dans quelque gouffre obscur,  
Tranquille, se servir de l'éclair pour recoudre  
Sa robe de nuée et son manteau de foudre.

In such a passage it is plain that the figure has run away with the poet. It insists on living by its own right, on working according to its own law; it refuses to be a part of a whole.

Unless to be fantastic is to be imaginative, that is not imaginative at all. In the metaphor followed out in this fashion, it is the ingenuity of the poet, not his imagination, that does the following. Nay—it is the very opposite of the imaginative faculty, it is a prosaic logic, imprisoned in a badly literal interpretation of the figure, that is at work here. The development of a figure through its ramifications has something of the calculable precision of machinery—the thing of all things most antagonistic to the freedom of imagination. Swift's "Meditation on a Broomstick" is perhaps the most elaborate example to be found of



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a *métaphore suivie*. It is not a monument of creative imagination.

The *métaphore suivie*, which I ventured to compare to a *ménage* in which the husband tyrannically dominates the wife, is only truly justified when the former is of a really imperial nature and the latter a complete nullity. Only when the thought is nothing may the metaphor be everything—a conjunction not so infrequent in lyric poetry that we are justified in passing it by.

Of such limitations as these, Hugo has little comprehension. On the contrary, the more intellectual his conception is, the less able is he to preserve its significance; the more exquisite the sentiment, the more apt is he to let its exquisiteness evaporate in his picturesque rendition. Above all, he fails to recognize that even the most original poetic imagery may be at times less adequate than unadorned simplicity for the expression of an idea, and may render trivial what is solemn, and belittle what is inherently grand. "The iniquities of the father shall be visited upon the children even unto the third and fourth generation"—that is an impressive enunciation of inexorable law.

Quand il a neigé sous le père,  
L'avalanche est pour les enfants.

That is more fanciful, but it is less impressive.

Great as is his imaginative gift, it is of a secondary order. It can create endless images for its own delectation, but it can not use them for higher ends. The image not being an end in itself, the proper function of the imagination that makes it is to span the interval between a spiritual truth and the image that serves as its channel of transmission. Imagery is not imagination, it is only the language that imagination uses. The poet who is so preoccupied with his image that it replaces the truth it should embody instead of setting it in relief, is deficient in the higher order of imagination. In divorcing the symbol from vital connection with its theme, and dealing with it in crude isolation, he shows himself as lacking in power to perform the imaginative miracle as the arid prosier whose truth remains impotently confined in the inexpressive phraseology of cold abstraction, which he has not the magical power to transmute by appropriate symbolism. Let us quote:

Mon esprit que le deuil et que l'aurore attire,  
Voit le jour par les trous des mains de Jésus-Christ.

Les autres sont des bruits, vous, vous êtes un chant.

Je violai du vers le cadavre fumant.

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Les lettres des chansons qui sortent de leurs bouches  
Vont écrire autour d'eux leurs noms sur leurs tombeaux.

Comme on arrête un gueux volant sur le chemin,  
Justicier indigné, j'ai pris le cœur humain  
Au collet, et j'ai dit: Pourquoi le fiel, l'envie,  
La haine? Et j'ai vidé les poches de la vie.  
Je n'ai trouvé dedans que deuil, misère, ennui.

A child dies of croup—but no! that is far too simple a way of putting the matter. Forget the child for a moment and fix the attention on the croup—a prolonged, intense attention, and gradually an image will arise and take form and the simple fact will be transformed as follows:

Le croup, monstre hideux, épervier des ténèbres,  
Sur la blanche maison brusquement s'abattit,  
Horrible, et, se ruant sur le pauvre petit,  
Le saisit à la gorge; ô noire maladie!

Strange to say, a rural Wisconsin bard, struggling to express imaginatively the same pathetic fact, arrived at almost the same imagery:

It was February, and we had a thaw;  
The wind from the East blew cold and raw,  
Two years ago;  
And fever, with its deadly paw,  
Laid hold of little Joe.

Evidently *les grands esprits se rencontrent*—avec les petits.

The romantic poets have discarded the three unities. Fie! what a simple way of announcing the fact—a college professor speaks thus! For Hugo the poets become “pirates, who, with sails or oars, have captured the arid archipelago of the triple unity.”

The scratching pens of a band of boys give the schoolmaster a headache—no——

Vos plumes, tas d'oiseaux hideux au vol obscur,  
De leur mille becs noirs lui fouillent la cervelle.

We say: The wind disperses the clouds—but Hugo sees

S'envoler sous le bec du vautour aiglon  
Toute la toison des nuées.

For us Mount Hecla is only a volcano like any other, for Hugo it is

Mont, gouffre et geôle,  
Bout de la mamelle du pôle.

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For us, in the bolder flights of our fancy, a man may be as proud as a peacock; for Hugo

Le puissant resplendit et du destin se joue.  
Derrière lui, tandis qu'il marche et fait la roue,  
Sa fiente épanouie engendre son flatteur.

Such is the power of the romantic imagination. We plain, unimaginative folk, doomed to the prosaic monotony of unrelieved fact, have not the privilege of seeing the Polish insurrection in such picturesque guise as Hugo did, but we may console ourselves for this in our immunity from seeing the same fact transformed into such figurative incongruities as these:

La Pologne aux fers ne peut plus même, hélas!  
Mordre le pied du Czar appuyé sur sa gorge!

or such nightmare visions as this:

Un cosaque affreux, que la rage transporte,  
Viole Varsovie, échevelée et morte;  
Et, souillant son linceul, chaste et sacré lambeau,  
Se vautre sur la vierge étendue au tombeau.

Again, for Hugo is rich in variations on this theme, we who lack imagination are preserved from seeing the Polish tragedy degraded into a trivial copy of the tale of Bluebeard: Russia, with gleaming sabre upraised; Poland, kneeling, clutching with white hands a blood-stained crucifix, and with dying eyes murmuring: "France, my sister, do you see nothing coming?" Whether such a passage is really a proof of a lively imagination or only of a deadly lack of taste and seriousness is perhaps not too nice a question to leave even the most ardent admirers of Hugo to decide.

The fact that a poet, even in his worst moments, and I have here quoted Hugo at his worst, can rest contented with such versions of his thought, must make it evident that he is without proper reverence for it,—could he otherwise indulge again and again, for it is a veritable obsession, in such defiling visions as that of the

Reste de salive encore blanchâtre aux bouches  
Qui crachèrent au front du pâle Jésus-Christ?

What is no less evident is that Hugo has no clear notion of the function and the limitations of the imagination. It is indeed so tyrannously dominant in him, that even in didactic prose, in those isolated intel-

lectual gems which certain authors so carefully collect under the title of *Pensées*, a thought of Hugo's, even when it begins in the sententious tone of La Rochefoucauld, commonly absconds into a mere image. He begins: *The man of merit who remains modest*—and, though we hardly expect Hugo to speak with insight upon this theme, we nevertheless look for some sort of logical conclusion, only, however, to be agreeably disappointed, for he ends: *is gold plated with silver*. The intellectual content is impalpable, the image is everything; but it is pleasing and satisfying. He says again: *Many friends are like the sun-dial: they mark only the hours when the sun shines on us*. The thought in itself is trite; it is only an imaged version of the *donec eris felix*, but it appears almost original, so happy is the image. Indeed, the images are so happy at times that they actually succeed in conveying to us what almost any one else would have been obliged to express in purely abstract terms. What impressionistic critic would not despairingly envy the subtle suggestiveness of the following: "The verses of Horace vaguely remind us of alabaster vases. Certain strophes seem borne by white arms above a luminous head, just as certain verses of the Bible seem to be returning from the fountain!"

Even in such felicitous examples, however, and perhaps best in them, one may feel the inevitable danger inherent in this materialization of the abstract, the danger that reason shall even in its own peculiar domain count for too little, and imagination for too much. What part does reason—not to say sanity—play in this attempt to express the power of Æschylus? "One feels in reading him, as if he must have been a denizen of the great primitive forests, now coal-fields, and must have taken massive strides over the reptilian and half animated roots of ancient vegetable monsters . . . under the gigantic mould of the monocotyledons, etc." Reason must ordinarily stick to reality and move close to earth. Hugo's imagination, on the contrary, always ambitious of soaring, perpetually lifts his thought from the earth—and, Heracles-like, strangles it. A critic, for example, who is intent on discharging his proper function, would say: "The classicism of Napoleon's age was colorless and imitative"—and we should hail this truth with the respectful though not enthusiastic acquiescence with which we hail most of the truths enunciated by the historians of literature. Hugo says: "This literature is of a pale complexion" (so far very good), "toward 1804 poetry was phthisical" (very good again); but now Hugo has warmed up to his image, he can no longer shake it off; he shakes off his idea instead. He goes on: "Original minds, direct and imme-



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diate poets, are not subject to these chloroses; the sickly pallor of imitation is unknown to them. They have not in their veins the poetry of other poets." There we have the over-active imagination pushing reason to the wall, and playing havoc with the idea. Imitation is simply a malady! One thinks of Virgil, who had the whole of Homer and Theocritus in his veins; of Dante, who revered Virgil as his Master; of Milton, who owed such a boundless debt to them all; of Goethe,—*Mon Dieu*, even a poet may profit by learning something! A victim of this unbalanced cult of imagination, as opposed to the sober critical faculty, Hugo consistently ends by dogmatically pronouncing Menander inferior to Aristophanes, Sophocles to Æschylus, Thucydides to Herodotus—excusable divagations perhaps, in one who knew no Greek, who had probably consumed little time reading the Greek poets and historians even in translation, and who doubtless was unaware that only a few pages of Menander survive. Evidently, a lively imagination, though it may enable one to make at times some charming critical pronouncements, is hardly an adequate outfit for the purposes of judicial criticism.

A poet who so readily accepts the play of the imagination as a substitute for depth and seriousness, will also fatally incline to themes that do not comport much depth and seriousness. A shallow muse will usually move in shallow waters. In many poems Hugo makes the impression of not having tried to rise as high as his subject demands; in many others he appears to have unadvisedly chosen a subject that is itself too low. He trusts so overweeningly in the decorative richness of his imagination and the kaleidoscopic scintillation of his dazzling fund of words, that he consents far too often to rhyme the most trivial and poetically sterile conceits. He proves himself at times even a worthy descendant of Delille, who boasted of having put into verse so many selected specimens of the vegetable kingdom per day. Hugo repeatedly put into rhyme specimens of spiritual vegetation that have quite as little claim to the consecration of poetry as any of the produce of the leguminous Delille. Pages upon pages of his work impress one as nothing more than exercises in versification executed with the complicity of the imagination. We seem to have stumbled upon the virtuoso during his practice-hour, his fingers running deftly over the keyboard, his spirit quiescent. It is not the poet, as Hugo loved to paint him, returned from some remote outpost of infinitude, from some high peak of prospect lost in cloudland, his wings dripping with divine azure, and his tongue vaguely wagging with words of supernal wisdom passing the understanding of man, even of Parisian Frenchmen. We are simply in the

presence of a very self-conscious *homme de lettres*, of an artificer of rare cunning in his art, who is calmly seated in his comfortable study, quietly manufacturing agitated verses and coldly fabricating poetic heats à *propos de bottes*, a literary Strauss invoking all the complicated resources of poetic orchestration to describe a baby's bath—or that of "Sara la Baigneuse."

Hugo's imagination so insistently translates everything into pictures that, even when he attempts to resist, it prevails over him. Beneath the current even of his most transporting themes, there is always a counter-current of imagery, by which the onward movement is retarded. That is one reason why he almost never achieves simplicity, or gives the impression of genuine absorption in his theme. Yet it is in these moments of retardation that the artist finds his opportunity. They are his moments of genuinely creative vision. It is then that his imagination reshapes in strangely impressive and illusive pictures the scattered elements that have been furnished by his wonderfully comprehensive eye, with that power of evocation which is the peculiar charm of romantic art, and in which only a few adepts of romanticism even remotely rival Hugo. Just as in Wordsworth the pictures often vanish into a moral, so in Hugo the moral element disintegrates into pure picturesqueness. In *Le Mendiant* we fancy that the poet is going to talk to us of poverty and of charity—and lo! these ideas suddenly dissolve and the poet remains gazing through the numberless moth-holes in the old man's cloak *jadis bleu*, through which he had seen the gleam of the fire—no, a vision of constellations in a blue sky! The imagination has prevailed here, it has driven away every rival power and has usurped the whole field. The effect is in Hugo's poetry often striking and artistically worth while, but it must be noted that the resultant values are purely æsthetic. However excellent the art, it is art for art's sake.

In such poetry thought is a vanishing quantity. In much of Hugo's poetry it has vanished altogether. The picturesque element does not simply supervene, it is solely present from the outset, and we have, as Veuillot put it, images dancing around nothing. If he writes many poems on themes of such slightness that the underlying idea seems only a discreetly introduced accessory, he writes many also that very gracefully dispense with any underlying idea whatever. A poetic prospector, he takes up the first notion that occurs to him and tries his luck—he is a Parnassian schoolboy elaborating a rhymed composition and accommodating it as he can to an assigned title. Usually it proves fertile in imaginative suggestion at least, and he succeeds in eliciting from it the

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invariable series of splendid pictures, framed perhaps with a just perceptible band of interpretative thought. He seldom needs more to achieve a passable and often a brilliant success. But sometimes the matter proves rebellious and remains obstinately empty of plausible suggestiveness. The poet is unable to find in it any soft spot where he can penetrate, so his fancy is forced to play idly on the surface. It indulges in irresponsible and chimerical divinations, in wild vaticinations as to the content,—and then he succeeds in seeing in a meat-hook the soul of Farinaccio, in the dawn the red crest of the rooster morn, and in the starry firmament an expectoration of the deity. His intelligence is slumbering, and his fancy has seized the opportunity to play with its tools. Many of his poems, subjected to a rigid analysis, prove to be little more than bundles of incoherent fancies, often mere scintillating and eloquent lists of the stage-properties useful for the scenic presentation of the matter in hand and ingenious constellations of metaphors suitable for its adornment. As in the old Italian comedies, the poet furnishes the scenario, and the matter is left to improvise itself. With notable frequency not only the poems, but even the separate divisions of them, end, not in a logical conclusion, but in a sort of *tableau vivant*, an artistically staged grouping of the elements of the theme. Most of Hugo's shorter lyrics are nothing more than decorative fancies; and his longer lyrics so frequently resolve themselves into mere ornamental conceits and caprices, and have so plainly been written to lead up to them, that the inference does not lie far off that we may explain in this way the generation of his poetry. He so seldom has any definite and palpable idea to deliver, something that he has thought and felt, that it is evident that his Muse was only lawless caprice. His inspirations do not come from an inner fund of experience, they are only the hazardous treasure-trove of fancy wandering in search of what it may rhyme.

The truth is that it is not the poet in person who "leans over the crumbling edges of bottomless problems," it is simply his fancy that is sent out in search of poetic novelties, of images and visions and stage effects. It is his alert and vigorous fancy, which no distance can tire, that has hunted down his game far afield, and that returns from its marauding expedition, driving before it down the slopes of rhyme-land a flock of "frightened metaphors." They are dragged or prodded in squirming protest into the poem with a compulsive force that would be admirable if the victims thus sacrificed on the altar of the graces did not so piteously cry out against the violence to which they are subjected.

When not balanced by a proper sense of what is profound and serious,

imagination always stands in imminent peril of thus degenerating into mere fancifulness, of mistaking "frightened metaphors" for acceptable symbols of reality. It is singular that a poet who expressed himself almost entirely in images, and who did so with an inexhaustible fertility that has been paralleled only two or three times perhaps, should have fallen so constantly into a vice that can in his case plead no shadow of excuse in constraining poverty.

A French scholar, M. Huguet, after an exhaustive study of Hugo's metaphors, arrives at the astonishing conclusion that they are natural and spontaneous, and not, as I maintain, unnatural and forced. He says: "The tree has hair, arms, a trunk; who knows whether this head which it shakes is not a pensive head, whether in the convulsive agitation of its branches we ought not to recognize gestures of despair, whether it does not stiffen its trunk like an athlete against the furious attacks of the wind? These flowers, of which the poet makes duchesses and marchionesses, is it not perfectly natural that they should adorn themselves with collars and furbelows? May not the yawning cave be a mouth expressing stupefaction or terror?" If such imagery, systematically carried out to its implications, be natural and spontaneous, what, we may well ask, is to become of those poor poets—for there are such—who purposely aim at achieving the unnatural and the arbitrary? M. Huguet continues: "If a rock is a headsman's block, the sea must be a black shroud, and the thunder-clap must represent the executioner's axe,"—and I am inclined to add: Good-sense will be the victim. M. Huguet proceeds inexorably to his conclusion: "The more we study Hugo's metaphors, the better we understand how true they are." True? to what? not to reality and nature certainly, nor to the laws of taste. M. Huguet, however, has no misgivings. "In almost all the metaphors of Victor Hugo we find a coherence and a precision which make them completely satisfying to the mind." Precision is not an absolute virtue. There is a false as well as a true precision. Hugo's figures tend to have an almost geometrical precision. They have a distinctness of outline and a boldness of relief so palpable that they force themselves upon us with an almost physical impressiveness. This characteristic they undeniably possess in well-nigh unprecedented degree. They have the very maximum of picturesque value. His images are cells in which he locks up his idea (underfed and inactive), and the prisoner adorns the walls with a wealth of flamboyant sketchery, converting them into a picture gallery where the visitor who came to see the prisoner forgets



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his errand in admiring the mural adornments. Do we see the morning star—or only a wild arabesque—in the couplet:

Je suis le caillou d'or et de feu que Dieu jette  
Comme avec une fronde au front noir de la nuit?

To compare the glaciers to a "mane of ice worthy of the lion, Pole," is indeed to make imagery with that precision of detail which seems so admirable to M. Huguet, but which simply makes us forget the reality for the image. The metaphoric analogue superimposed in such high relief upon reality leaves to the latter only the significance of the mere material wood or marble out of which the sculptor carves his designs. The image is foreign and even hostile to the thought. The relations between them are cold and strained. They pretend to meet on equal terms, but each feels the other to be an unwelcome guest disturbing the company into which it intrudes.

The grace of absolute spontaneity Hugo, even at his best, does not possess. His finest images are apt to have a certain hardness of finish, a rounded symmetry, an overwrought completeness, which hint a little too much of the conscious artist, well aware that these are the most precious gems in his poetry and intent on giving each of them the fullest benefit of workmanship and setting. Their power of suggestiveness is pressed too hard, they are too thoroughly exhausted of their metaphorical content. They hint too much of ingeniously organized arrangement. We feel that on stripping off the flesh with which he has clothed them we should find the bones of their skeleton carefully numbered. Something else than nature has been at work here. Instead of a spray of dewy blossoms we get strings of pearls and clusters of diamonds, self-conscious beauties and shining images,

Forever singing as they shine  
The hand that made us is divine.

Hugo's imagery is not, like Shakespeare's, ground up as it were and wrought like shining particles into the very substance of his poetry. It is the surface decoration of a pattern which without it would be bare and blank. The images adhere, they do not inhere. Cut out an image from Shakespeare and you will usually find that you are cutting out a link from a chain of ideas. Hugo's ideas do not come in chains. Each of them stalks in solitary grandeur, like a corporal, at the head of a squad of images. This corporal is a recruiting officer, and the

squad that follows him may be indefinitely multiplied. Take out what may be called album verses, and Hugo's lyrics are nearly all disproportionately lengthy. That is because his imagery propagates itself in an intellectual vacuum. It goes on multiplying in the vague hope that among a score of beings of its own kind, there may be born to it one of a more intellectual strain.

Hugo's imagination, being thus called upon to supply not merely a part but virtually the whole of his poetry, was necessarily overwrought. If imagination was the master faculty in his talent, will was the master trait in his temperament, and it is undeniable that throughout the enormous body of his verse, his will often called on his imagination to work when the latter was already flagging from over-exertion. Under these circumstances it too often perfidiously whisked its twin-sister fancy into its place; and the poet, never suspecting the trick that was put upon him, went on accepting the cheaper wares of fancy with the same complacency as the more precious product of imagination. At one moment we are ravished with exquisite similitudes set in musical verse, and the next the same charming music is wedded to the most unworthy and incongruous libretto: the music hints of heavenly inspirations, but the words tell us that Ruy Blas is an earthworm in love with a star, or that the poet, trying to keep at a safe distance from his radiant lady-love, is a barrel of gun-powder afraid of the spark.

These lapses into cheap fancifulness, often supervening upon the legitimate and beautiful use of imagery in which Hugo is so remarkably rich, are so constant a blemish in his work that few of his critics have failed to record their exasperation at it and their feeling that this fault lies at the very centre of his work like a canker in the bud. Sainte-Beuve in a letter to Madame Olivier (27 May, 1840) indignantly protests against a verse in which Hugo speaks of love as something that boils. "Is it not," the critic says, "as if some one were suddenly to appear in an elegant drawing-room carrying a kettle? Hugo offers many of these incongruities. They are not merely blemishes, they are filthinesses."

Doudan, that exquisite and Attic *connoisseur*, sums up his impression of Hugo in these terms:

"There are many charming verses strewn through his pages, mingled with the strangest balderdash. You find all of a sudden a beautiful wild rose, wet with dew, alongside of an old slipper and some broken earthenware. I believe it is not of set purpose that he

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mixes everything in this way. He cannot distinguish the beautiful from the ugly. He has a fairly powerful nature which produces with energy and indifference palm-trees, serpents, toads, humming-birds and spiders; he claps them all into a sack, and his volume is done."

The majority of Hugo's images being the product of mere fancy, it follows that he owes something of his reputation as an especially imaginative poet to the fact that he has often picked up what other poets let fall, has used the images which they rejected. Many of his images are new only because no one ever chose to use them. To call the dawn the red crest of the rooster morn is to be imaginative only in the same fashion that Polonius was when he consented to see a camel in the clouds—to please the mad Hamlet. Fancy, unrestrained by reason and taste, is apt to throw open the double doors that shut out the vast realm of fantasticality and madness. Hugo's fancy is very much at home there. His admirers have with mistaken reverence sought for the laws governing his vision even when it disports in these utterly lawless regions.

Du haut de leur rêve . . .  
Ils sont tombés le front sur la société.

Le rut religieux du grand cèdre cynique.

Le chêne chuchote et prend sa contrebasse,  
L'eau sa flûte, et le vent son stradivarius.

La gaîté sainte est la soucoupe  
De la tasse où tu bois ton lait.

Half of Hugo's figures seem imaginative only because they are far-fetched. Methinks that at very slight expense ingenious young gentlemen of unstudious habits could be hired at any time in the cabarets of the Latin Quarter to defy logic and common-sense by turning out such figures at so much per hundred.

All this is a matter of pure artistry and not of heaven-sent inspiration. M. Mabillean says: "As every image evoked becomes a genuine active force in the intelligence, its action will be modified by the deviation it has suffered; not only the beings represented will be modified, but they will act in accordance with the simple character conserved. The mountains are bald—therefore they are grave, severe, philosophic." In that case, must we not see a genuine active force of highly imaginative potency at work in such a book as "Alice in Wonderland," which was the product of the leisure hours of a mathematician?

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It is not improbable, I think, that this particular variety of imagination is somewhat akin to the mathematical imagination. M. Mabillean says further: "Before Hugo, no one had ever spoken of the jaws of night, the claws of night; no one had thought of seeing shadow under the guise of a hydra, or horror in the form of a pale nymph wringing her hands by the side of chaoses not yet called into being which sob through the infinite." If indeed no one had ever spoken thus, it were something to be thankful for; but is it quite certain that Hugo's preeminence is secure and that neither Marini nor Gongora ever succeeded in equalling in extravagance this *Espagnol retentissant*? What a family likeness between him and them!

Vous ôtez une proie  
Au feuilleton méchant qui bondissait de joie  
Et d'avance poussait des rires infernaux  
Dans l'ancre qu'il se creuse au bas des grands journaux.

Le vieux ancre attendri pleure comme un visage.

Les vieux antres pensifs, dont rit le geai moqueur,  
Clignent leurs gros sourcils et font la bouche en cœur.

Et dans l'ombre entr'ouvrant ses mâchoires de pierre,  
Un vieil ancre ennuyé baillait au fond des bois.

Pour l'œil profond qui voit les antres sont des cris,  
Hélas! le cygne est noir, le lis songe à ses crimes.

There is no law of imagination governing such figures—because there is really no imagination involved in them. Every reader of Hugo is familiar with this style of metaphor: it is produced by simply making an impossible equation between a ghostly abstraction and an obstinately concrete reality, thanks to some purely factitious or verbal point of tangency. This is really the borderland of the pun, and all the varieties of the latter are propagated here by random seeds whenever the wind blows from the proper quarter. In this lawless region where foul is fair and fair is foul, there is a perpetual saturnalia in which a revolutionary sentiment of metaphorical equality dissolves all things in a universal embrace of fraternity. All that was high gaily dances attendance upon all that was low. Ideas that have hitherto had the best reputation for gravity of demeanor, and that are invested moreover with the venerableness that attaches to age, appear in grotesque travesties, drink themselves drunk with the heady wine of fantasy and dance in vertiginous bacchanal with loose-zoned,



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giddy and most improper conceits. The day of Boileau is indeed over, the Revolution has penetrated into literature, and the costumes and the customs of the Directorate are in vogue on the slopes of Parnassus.

Not only is the vast realm of fantasticality made tributary to the treasury of Hugo's imagery; there is another vast and almost virgin realm that lies conterminous with it which he has also explored and exploited—the realm of the ugly and the grotesque. He has sought to overthrow what has been one of the most fixed conventions of poetic art ever since the days of Homer, that of subordinating whatever is ugly, deformed and abnormal. Hugo denies the validity of this tradition. Charm and exquisiteness do not appeal to him as primary requisites in poetry. He repudiates all one-sided worship of the beautiful; he would be as universal as Nature herself—and as unselective as a mirror. That is why his work which so often invites epithets like *splendid*, *grand*, or *striking*, so seldom seems purely charming. That is why it appeals so feebly to those whose taste is formed on the models and conforms to the standards that were honored in poetry until his day.

Car beaucoup ici-bas sentent que l'espoir tombe,  
Et se brisent la tête à l'angle de la tombe,  
Comme vous briseriez, le soir, sur le pavé,  
Un œuf où rien ne germe et qu'on n'a pas couvé!

No commentator will retrace that to an original.

Entr'ouvrant ses lèvres de douleur,  
Mon ulcère, ô vivants, tâche de vous sourire.

That too is doubtless without respectable precedent. In the years following the *coup d'état*, Hugo seems to be obsessed by gangrened and salivary imaginings—especially by the image of expectorations converted into stars.

Quand Jésus commençait sa longue passion,  
Le crachat qu'un bourreau lança sur son front blême  
Fit au ciel à l'instant même  
Une constellation.

During this period the pituitous metaphor occurs and recurs with a frequency that wearies even the most robust taste. In no other poet is there any such impartial proportion between the ugly and the beautiful elements—unless we descend to Baudelaire, and Rollinat,

to the school of decay and stench. In an assemblage of Hugo's metaphors (such as we find in M. Huguet's volumes) one is dumb-founded to observe how absolutely foreign to Hugo is that traditional good taste which sifts and strains the natural world in order to segregate for the poet's uses that small residue that is either exquisitely or grandly beautiful. The beautiful figures are actually in the minority!

The artist can no doubt adorn everything he touches—but much must always depend on the nature of his materials. When Hugo proposes to lift up the grotesque to the dignity of high art, he fails to recognize that, however much power he may exert in lifting it, he can not compass so wide an interval of separation except by a disastrous compromise—his art and the unworthy matter it is to be exercised upon must needs meet each other half-way.

The grotesque is of course, as a discreet seasoning, admitted into art when moving on its lower planes. Even here, the quantity is usually at the minimum—as in the case of all seasonings, it is a question of taste. But what shall we say of a poet who maintains that the grotesque is not a seasoning but an ingredient of poetry, and who even makes it one of the principal ones? It is evident that taste is no longer a final criterion in his philosophy of art. He recognized no limits here. At the top of the scale, things sacred, even God himself, are not immune from the irreverent play of his fancy. At the bottom of the scale, the region of the obscene and the malodorous, he does not disdain to rummage for imagery, even among the foulnesses that had lain undisturbed ever since the robust hand of Rabelais last stirred them. To quote examples, however, might be to evince the same signal lack of taste that is here complained of.

That is why even Hugo's warmest admirers cannot credit him with the possession of taste in accordance with any of the traditional canons. In truth, art, rendered universal as nature, and arrogating that unchartered liberty which was for Hugo the whole of romanticism, reposes on a fundamental negation of all taste. That is the only valid explanation of his strange insistence on the right of the grotesque and the ugly to a place, and a large and unquestioned place, in the domain of literature.

In part this was the congealed attitude, from which Hugo never freed himself, of the rebellious young romanticists of 1830, who cherished all sorts of dark monstrosities in order to distress the bourgeois and to vex the ghost of Boileau. But fundamentally it is due to an indubitable natural slant of Hugo's imagination toward the

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things that lie farthest away from classic art, and at the very confines and circumference of any art whatever—and often clearly beyond its bounds. Purely Gothic, and even primitive, and blessed with the robust nerves that go with a temperament which has escaped the debilitating refinements of culture, Hugo is always ready to turn away from the spectacle of pure beauty and to dwell with a fatal fascination on the night-side of nature and the nightmare side of man, on what still offers much imaginative novelty mainly because the civilized instinct of man has led him more and more to avert his gaze from it.

Hugo's taste for whatever is wild and terrible and his disdain for what is simply beautiful found even more significant expression in another art than literature, one which he practiced for himself alone and with no thought of a public. He was a very skilful draughtsman and nothing could be more strikingly individualistic than the natural bent betrayed in his innumerable sketches (all in black and white). "During thirty years," says M. Mabillean, "he was content to imitate the nightmares of Goya and the architectural terror of Piranesi, without a single time attempting to sketch a harmonious form or a beautiful face."

Not only did Hugo's imagination exhibit a natural bent toward these things, it moves among them with native ease and mastery. If they form one of the greatest blemishes in his writings, they also belong among its chief ornaments. "In Hugo, even the nightmare bears the mark of genius," said Lamartine. One is tempted to say "The nightmare above all else." No other poet has cultivated hallucination so successfully. He possesses a keen sense of the mysterious and the marvellous in nature. He has, not a spiritual, nor an intellectual, but a purely physical, sense of the supernatural, a sense of the reality of that which lies just beyond the range of ocular vision and to which imagination alone can give shape and substance. On this side his imagination is really creative, exhibiting a weird power, an amazing capacity for giving the impression of actual contact with these chill and ghastly visions. Despite the inevitable puerilities that mar every human figure of Hugo's, *Le Parricide* is a remarkable success in its kind—a bad kind, perhaps—the spectral tale of the Monk Lewis variety. So in the poem, misnamed *La Conscience*, since conscience even in the most embryonic form is quite absent from it, we have a most impressive picture of abject terror in the presence of the supernatural.

Yet this spell is a dubious one. The poets in general have felt, what Hugo did not feel, that the region of the spectral (and the monstrous) is not one in which it is good for man to dwell. It is one for

which he is not adapted and which he finds sterile in spiritual values. It is in vain that Hugo assures us that *L'abîme est un prêtre, et l'ombre est un poète*. They have not been reduced to harmony and order; they are alien alike to real religion and to true poetry; they are not apprehensible, but remain chaotic and disquieting. Sane art instinctively turns away from them, or if it enter these strange territories, it is not as an idle sight-seer; it brings with it the sanction of a higher principle of order and law, as Dante traces his way through the Inferno under the guidance of Virgil. To Hugo this region is only a picture-gallery where he is privileged to set up his easel and make felicitously deviating copies—with no rival at his elbow.

Although he, almost from the very beginning, makes himself very much at home in this region, he did not at first so thoroughly emancipate himself from tradition, or so fully discover the richness of this lode in his imagination, as to give it the predominant attention that he did later. In his earliest work in verse (not in prose) we find for the most part merely conventional imagination, such as hints of bookish training more than of observation or poetic vision. The earlier *Odes* are rather formal exercises not unsuggestive of a clever pupil in a Jesuit school, and the *Ballades* deal mainly with the conventional paraphernalia of feudalism and chivalry so dear to the young romanticists, though already occasional images appear that hint of more originality. The absurd *Géant* even anticipates the wild Munchausenism which in the "Légende" is sometimes mistaken for an epic vein. The "Orientales" are a transitional work: the poet has discovered his imagination and revels in its use; he roams about in the world of light and color, but despite his show of truculence he uses his imagination with a secret constraint. Behind his landscapes and his images, if they can indeed be separated, there seems to exist a list of authorities consulted. It is only after 1830 that Hugo becomes quite independent and ventures to work after the model, to see first and then paint, or to paint from memory, in either case with bold deviations.

The struggle for supremacy between faithful and fanciful vision is evident through all the middle period of Hugo's work, as is the contest for supremacy between beauty and what he called *le grotesque*. The lyrics written between 1830-40 are plainly the product of a highly imaginative poet, but one hardly feels that they differ absolutely, even though they do differ immensely, from the work of other highly imaginative and undisciplined poets. Though they have thus far been regarded by the critics too much as preludes to his later work, it seems not



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unlikely that they will, in virtue of their retaining after all so much resemblance to the work of other poets, come in time to be the most esteemed of his poems, being, as they are, the most human and the least extravagant and manneristic. When judgment recovers its balance, after the excessive admiration extorted by the acrobatics of romanticism, it will probably end by turning from the sublime absurdity of most of Hugo's later work to the more sanely moderated beauty of the earlier lyrics, and one may even prefer the personality of the poet as revealed in the "*Feuilles d'Automne*" to that shown in the *Rolands*, the *Eviradnuses*, and the *Welfs* of the "*Légende*."

In the "*Feuilles d'Automne*" we have Hugo's genius happily restrained and purified, I suspect, by the taste and the counsels of Sainte-Beuve. It marks the nearest approach to a sane and rational art that we get from Hugo, the poetry in which his peculiarities of manner are least exaggerated, his style most moderate, his imagination most sage; he is much nearer to our sympathies here than he ever is again. The final impression is that of a highly gifted poet, not uninclined to abuse his imaginative gift and to spur his Pegasus to rather wild paces, yet condescending to look over his shoulder from time to time to see if we follow him, singing with a decided touch of arrogance but with enough of the adorable ardor and freshness of youth to make us half forget the fault, rich in performance and even richer in promise, and, though already plainly a little spoiled, and given to posing as a romantic young man with a past (and no future), under the curse of a fatality, sad incurably and shorn of all illusion, in reality, turning with a healthy expectancy and a keen interest toward those things that form the chief substance of life as of poetry, the common joys and duties of man, family ties, love, religion, the dream of glory and the cult of beauty in all its forms—a figure that would be wholly engaging did not the later and insufferably pretentious Hugo, the prophet and the demigod, every now and then incongruously intervene. Something of this early charm and of this early humanness persists, though in diminishing proportions, through the lyrics of the next decade, although the tyrannous master faculty, the imagination, makes itself more and more dominant. In his second manner, in the lyrics of the years of exile, the imagination is omnipresent and omnipotent.

C'en est fait. Son génie est plus mûr désormais,  
Son aile atteint peut-être à de plus fiers sommets,  
La fumée est plus rare au foyer qu'il allume,  
Son astre haut monté soulève moins de brume,

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Son coursier applaudi parcourt mieux le champ clos,  
Mais il n'a plus en lui, pour l'épandre à grands flots  
Sur des œuvres de grâce et d'amour couronnées,  
Le frais enchantement de ses jeunes années!

It is not alone the charm of youth that has vanished: it is that last vestige of docility and of respect for tradition which Hugo, now in the full consciousness of his genius, has so completely renounced. Sometimes we get finer strains than ever before, and sometimes

Dans l'affreux crépuscule  
Le rhéteur grimaçant ricane et gesticule.

The most notable characteristic of Hugo's imagination during the latter half of his career is the predominance of the visionary over the visual imagination. The "Contemplations" and the "Légende" usually pass for his masterpieces, because his imagination has unquestionably reached here its culmination of power and boldness. We get now *le vrai Victor Hugo, monstre incomparable en son genre*, as Brunetière puts it. The "Contemplations" and the "Légende" are the works in which Hugo's genius has entered into complete possession of him. But the power and the boldness are dearly bought. The poet is become a prophet; he has only one foot in this world, the other is upraised over the threshold of the infinite, and what chiefly attracts him henceforth even in the world of nature is no longer, as for other poets, the multiply details, often of a beauty touched with strangeness and often so endearingly familiar, of its endlessly varied panorama; it is the grandiose aspects of the universe that in their wildness, their uncomprehended immensity and their very defiance of the eye of the beholder, are only symbols and signs of the infinite. As Carlyle's hero-worship degenerated into a cult of mere brutal force, so Hugo's romantic worship of power degenerated into a worship of mere brutal vastness, of the unlimited and the unrestrained, into an undivine Titanism.

As may be expected in a romantic poet, Hugo is a most convinced advocate of the claims of unrestrained revery, of the privilege of the spirit to divagate aimlessly through space and to make itself at home in cloudland. "The empyrean, Elysium, Eden, the portico opening overhead above the far-set stars of revery, the statues of light standing on azure entablatures, the supernatural, the superhuman, that is the favorite form of contemplation. Man is at home in the clouds. He finds it the most natural thing in the world to wander off into azure space and to tread constellations under foot." These are controverti-

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ble statements, and they accord to man a license which he will do well to avail himself of with infinite precautions. Revery, at best a holiday privilege in this sublunary world, is, especially on this cosmic scale, apt to lead to some form of romantic megalomania. Man can not expatiate much and often in the limitless blue and consort daily and hourly with the supernatural and the superhuman and tread constellations underfoot without imminent risk of ineffective dispersion and even of sterile hallucination.

Hugo's work from a very early period betrayed an abnormal contempt for rationality. "*Han d'Islande*," written at twenty-one, might well seem symptomatic of a certain mental alienation. This dominance of the imagination is progressive—no doubt because the poet cultivated it. But it is not until the later "*Contemplations*" that the reader of Hugo suddenly feels that an abyss has leaped open between the poet and himself. He now finds that he is obliged to take figuratively what the poet asserts literally, to take in a *Pickwickian* sense what the poet utters with imperturbable solemnity—and often in no sense whatever what the poet guarantees as divinely inspired. On all the problems of speculative thought Hugo now makes authoritative pronouncements in which reason has no share, and he reports with pontifical pomposity visions which seem only the nightmares and hallucinations of a disordered brain. He henceforth admits a large element of madness into his work. He transcribes verses dictated by spirits, he talks transmigration, sees souls in excrements; he puts on the prophet, falls into an oracular and sibylline style, keeps open house at night to wraiths and spooks, and talks of God with an offhand familiarity that seems to hint of relations far more intimate than were enjoyed by any of the saints, prophets, or patriarchs. The change in the poet is greater than any earlier symptoms could have indicated. What has caused this sudden and permanent disequilibrium? Hugo had resisted emotional shocks such as absolutely unbalanced his brother Eugene and his daughter Adele. Is the change in him due, perhaps, to the feverish interest which he at this time developed in table-turning and kindred spiritualistic phenomena? Is there possibly a certain psychic derangement at the bottom of his visionary speculations and his wild vaticinatory attitude, so different from the purely æsthetic attitude of the prophet-poet of earlier days? It is usually interpreted as a pose—and it was at first pure pose no doubt—but this explanation seems in the end not wholly adequate. This wilful madness seems, like Hamlet's, at times to cross the frontier and become real. Sometimes, even, it seems distinguished

from real madness only by its lesser plausibility and its lesser lucidity! It does not, like that, set out from reality to wander away into the impossible while yet justifying itself to itself. Instead of reasoning wildly, it does not reason at all but boldly dogmatizes in the intense inane.

Ayez pitié! voyez des âmes dans les choses.  
Hélas! le cabanon subit aussi l'écrou;  
Plaiguez le prisonnier, mais plaiguez le verrou;  
Plaiguez la chaîne au fond des bagnes insalubres;  
La hache et le billot sont deux êtres lugubres;  
La hache souffre autant que le corps, le billot  
Souffre autant que la tête; ô mystères d'en haut!

These mysteries are indeed baffling—but the still more baffling mystery that lurks behind such writing must be left perhaps to the specialist.

Hallucination is the inevitable mood reached by an apocalyptic imagination expatiating through infinity unrestrained by reason. Hallucination is the only word that can characterize the innumerable poems in which Hugo deals with the religious and cosmologic visions that so growingly absorbed his Muse during the latter half of his career. He transports us into a world often sublime in aspect and grandly rendered on his canvas; but it is a world whose atmosphere is irrespirable, and which is quite as apt to give us a sick headache as a poetic rapture.

L'immensité ricane et la tombe grimace.

It is only a step from the sublime to the ridiculous. The older Hugo is a colossus perpetually passing back and forth with a stage-stride between these two domains which he has made his own. All his later poetry overflows with illimitable visions of celestial landscapes, usually nocturnal and spectral, with planets rolling none knows whither, with the unchained forces of nature convulsed in tempest and earthquake, and in which are let loose all the monstrous and ghostly powers that haunt a brain enamoured of darkness and horror. At every street-corner of this uncanny world hang signs that read *ombre, sombre, vaste, immense, sinistre*, and everything that breathes or stirs, or simply looms up in the gloom is *fauve*. It is a world of murky shadows and sickly lights, of yawning gulfs (with nothing in them), animated with a ghastly life, peopled with monsters and strewn with natural phenomena no less monstrous than they. The strangest and the wildest conceptions rise, take shape, and confront us with spectral visages and sepulchral questionings.



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L'arbre qui sort d'une fêlure,  
A-t-il en bas sa chevelure  
Qui plonge au globe rajeuni?  
Penseurs, têtes du ciel voisines,  
Vos cheveux sont-ils les racines  
Par où vous puisez l'infini?

Yet even from this background of wanton horrors, the poet, reminiscent of his earlier self, still evokes from time to time some sunlit corner of landscape, some passing vision of beauty, some exquisite bit of poetry, that prove that he still possesses the enchanter's wand, though he uses it chiefly now, in wofully illegitimate fashion, for a species of poetical black magic. The over-development of the undisciplined romantic imagination, which so evidently threatened that faculty even in its prime, is not a healthy development implying a genuine though disproportionate strength; it is a hypertrophic enlargement, a morbid growth which culminates only when the imagination becomes senescent, when it becomes less rich in real vigor and variety—elephantiasis of the imagination, one of Hugo's critics has called it.

Quite as much as Musset who mistakenly made sensuous passion the substance of poetry, quite as much as Lamartine who made an earthly and voluptuous idealism its basis, quite as much as de Vigny who confined himself in his ivory tower and mistook his own plaintive and querulous broodings for the inspirations of the philosophic Muse, Hugo, by this exhibition of the triumph and decay of a tyrannic imagination, has forced upon us the conviction of the fundamental inadequacy and hollowness of the romantic ideal in art—that art which so unwisely disdained the patient discipline, the reason, and the objectivity which the classics had worshipped—in France perhaps overmuch.

If there be any substantial justice then in all these strictures of Hugo's ideal and performance, one can retain little sympathy for the old unqualified eulogies of the Hugolaters. "Among all the great poets that humanity has produced," says Coppée, "Victor Hugo is the one who has created the greatest number of images, the best-sustained images, the most striking, the most magnificent." This is simply an example of that laudatory criticism which is as unscrupulous and as indiscriminating as an epitaph—and which usually contributes quite as successfully to make the virtues it commemorates sleep unnoticed.

Had Coppée been an enemy instead of a friend to Hugo's fame, he might have said that Hugo had of all poets invented the greatest number of factitious images, the most extravagant, the most false, the most ugly—and he would again have spoken with the unconvincingness that happily accompanies the enunciation of purely one-sided truths. Yet let it be noted that either as panegyrist or as detractor he would be making statements measurably true. For it is equally true that Hugo possessed a wonderfully fertile imagination and that he signally abused it, that he possessed great riches and expended them with very questionable taste. It is equally true that in the temple of art which he decorated the splendor of ornament is prodigally laid on, and that much of it is of almost unexampled magnificence, while much of it is cheap and tawdry. And however numerous and well-sustained and magnificent Hugo's images may be, those who have been wont to worship in more chastely classic edifices will be unable to suppress the final verdict that Hugo's imagination is after all only splendidly barbaric. They will never for a moment sanction such fundamentally uncritical confusions as Brunetière is guilty of when, identifying chaos with order, he asserts that Hugo's imagination is akin to that of Dante and of Æschylus.

Hugo had a rich but not a great imagination. The latter is a constructive faculty in whose creations there is a fine harmony between the whole and the parts; it carries its wealth within itself. Hugo sought it without. His teeming invention, bent only on the elaboration of detail but oblivious of larger relations, knows no temperance, no proportions, no repose. He has missed the civilizing touch of Hellenism; he remains a Gothic artist. He is, perhaps, the greatest representative in literature of, not imagination, but arbitrary fancy. He is a wonderful decorative artist, who, although but little of his work finds a place in the interior of the temple of art, has covered whole façades, domes, cornices and turrets with every variety of arabesque and adornment, from the most complicated down to the most diminutive. His statuary has been far surpassed in beauty and in nobleness by other artists, though none have emulated its colossal proportions; his decorative tracery has been outdone in delicacy and exquisiteness, though none have equalled it in quantity; but for monsters, tailed devils, and gargoyles he is the unapproachable and supreme modern master.

## CHAPTER IV

### NATURE

Pure description holds the place of sense.

POPE

NO poet has put so much of nature into his verse as Hugo. There is hardly an aspect of the outer world, from the grandest to the most miniature, that has wholly escaped his curious eye, and his descriptive competence is unparalleled. In general, the modern nature-poets have confined themselves to certain select and ornamental portions of the vegetable kingdom. The Alps had been overlooked by the poets until Rousseau pointed them out. The roar of Freiligrath's lion was a distinct novelty in the German *Dichterwald*, and Blake's tiger was the first that the English poetry-lover took to his bosom. Hugo made no invidious distinctions between high and low, he recognized no outlawry in nature, and he turned with equal sympathy to vegetable, animal, or mineral phenomena. How many things, long banished from Parnassus by tradition and taste, has he not attempted to reinstate! Coleridge, in a moment of romantic expansiveness, wrote an *Ode to an Ass*; Hugo triumphantly drives this exiled brother back into the green fields of poetry, laden with a whole pack of contraband articles and followed by a long procession of humbler and smaller kindred, from the toad and the screech-owl down to the earthworm and the louse. Noah himself, on entering the ark, had not a larger following.

Too primitive and unspiritual to be much at home among the supersensuous and subtle refinements with which latter-day poetry usually overlays nature, Hugo finds a compensation, if there be one, in the mere spectacle of nature in itself, in the delighted sense of mastery and possession with which he moves about in the physical world. He prizes only what he can see and touch, and when his imagination lifts him beyond the bounds of the visible and the tangible, he still sees and seeks in space, even in infinity itself, only the colossal mirage of sensuous terrestrial phenomena. He is very resolutely the poet of things. No poet ever loved them so exclusively for their own sake,

ever caressed them with so constant and untiring an eye, or was ever so rejoiced and thrilled by the endless procession of the phenomenal universe in glittering and multifarious pageant across his dazzled retina. Other poets have loved the outer world more wisely, because they found in it a symbol of the inner one; Hugo cherishes it for itself without question and without afterthought.

With his extraordinary visual endowment, he could hardly be other than a great descriptive poet; though it does not by any means follow that he must needs be a great nature-poet also, or even that he really loved nature (except in the sense in which Taine says that Balzac loved the monsters he described). Hugo's love of things is that of a painter who loves with his eye only. He loves them as a sculptor loves marble, as a potter loves clay—as the raw materials of art that he delights to work in. Old armor, stage costumes, a devil-fish, or a crucified screech-owl solicit him quite as readily as rose or lily. The Paris slums, the Paris sewers, draw and fascinate his gaze quite as readily as the country-side or the hills, and he describes them with an even more lingering dalliance.

Though he refuses to accept with loyalty that primary condition of faithful pictorial art, the subordination of the artist to that which he sees, it is nevertheless undeniable that Hugo's visual power is not only extraordinary, but is in its combined range and intensity quite unique. To the attentive student of his work it is evident enough that we have here a typical example of modern specialization, of an over-developed faculty such as had never before been equalled, such as was never quite paralleled even by the most emulous of his rivals. It was a natural endowment sedulously cultivated until it attained what to the lover of balance and measure can not but seem monstrous proportions. The physical dwarfs the metaphysical in his poetry to a degree that is truly disquieting, and plainly suggests that we are in the presence of a great artist of the decadence.

It is one of the truisms of criticism that Hugo sees nature with a more discerning eye than he does man. His inferiority in the latter respect is indeed a very large part of the heavy price he pays for his singular acuity of vision in the physical world. It is so with Théophile Gautier; it is so, I can not but feel, even with Balzac; it is notably so with the realists and naturalists. That is the ineluctable curse which has been put upon whosoever sees only for the sake of seeing and describes only for the sake of describing.



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The power is, however, in Hugo's case, extraordinary and even unique, and for that reason the study of its evolution, of its aims and achievements, and of its degeneration is highly edifying.

Though Hugo habitually allows his undisciplined fancy to confuse and distort the precious data gathered by his over-worked eye, he can when he deigns to do so, reproduce what he has seen with amazing accuracy and with a fulness of detail that seems literally all-embracing. The sweep and penetration of his glance, the impressibility and potency of his eye are equally striking whether he describes a toad or a planet,—and with what visible complacency he dwells on all the elements of his picture! How he heaps detail upon detail as if the vision could never be complete, as though visual satiety were an undreamed impossibility! But this abnormal power (and this is the case with all art that has departed from its true centre) presupposes something of the same abnormality in the reader. These unending enumerations, this whirling panorama often prove too taxing for him to follow, and he lags gradually behind his Brobdingnagian cicerone; but the latter never flags, his senses continue as fresh, his vision remains as keen, his childlike delight in what he sees as eager on the last page as on the first. Slight as was Hugo's interest in science as such, he can even on occasion describe natural phenomena in a way that only a trained scientist could emulate in exactness. In "Dieu" there is a typical passage on the erosive action of water, a description of such striking power that it seems as if the poet had lifted the veil and laid bare the secret workings of nature. And in another passage of the same poem, how powerfully painted is the wild, impulsive uprush of cosmic vitality, of fecund and pullulating life seeking to manifest and multiply itself, and converting all nature into a mad orgy of unchained instinct. And what an impetuous rush and roar of words—it is the bursting of a torrent.

Hugo is at his best in passages of this sort rather than in his dealings with still life, which does not greatly appeal to his stormy genius. It is not repose but life and motion for which he feels a temperamental affinity. Not only are things seen by him with unrivalled comprehensiveness of vision, but he sees them live and move. His talent can not only fix the visions on the canvas, but it has the more magical power of portraying them without fixing them. They have not the rigidity of painting, but seem to move across the canvas still retaining all the flexile and shifting attitudes of life; the poet seems rather

to have mirrored than painted them, and the invidious interval that separates pictorial art from the things it pictures seems for his happy genius to have contracted to but half its span.

But farther than such feats of descriptive art Hugo's talent can hardly go. That is why no one denies that he is a great descriptive artist, while the question whether he is a nature-poet rouses the same dissentient war of words that gathers around all the elementary questions of Hugo-criticism. But it may be asked, why is not a great descriptive poet, a supreme painter of the beauty and grandeur of nature, even though he go no further than to paint, also a great nature-poet? Simply because nature viewed pictorially appeals only to the eye, distracts us momentarily from the actual experiences of living, but remains foreign to what lies below the sensuous layer of our nature. Few men and few poets are content to abide long in this outpost on the frontier of experience. Man is more than an eye and demands that a poet be more than a mural decorator of the house of life. A thing remains alien to the spirit until it becomes in some degree a symbol or sign of what is human. The man of refined and serious taste will never accept purely descriptive renditions of nature as satisfying; and no matter how brilliantly executed they may be, he will always view their dubious spell with a certain suspicion and a certain jealousy at the intrusion into literature of an inferior aim. It is fairly established as a canon of criticism that excessive description is a certain symptom of literary decadence. A virile age demands that the sensuous elements be subordinated. Dr. Johnson's vigorous denunciation of pastoral plays, despite its uncompromising bluntness, formulates the essential doctrine: "A pastoral of a hundred lines may be endured; but who will bear to hear of sheep and goats and myrtle bowers and purling rivulets through five acts? Such scenes please barbarians in the dawn of literature, and children in the dawn of life, but will be for the most part thrown away as men grow wise and nations grow learned." That is the truly humanistic attitude. It is that which we find in the greatest poets, and notably in the ancient classics. Had any one called Dante a great painter we may be sure he would have rejoined: *Yes—of the inner life.* That is the surest token of the really great poet; his greatness is never chiefly pictorial. Description is only an accessory of art, not its substance.

"If in a drawing-room," says M. Martha, a French critic of very classic taste, "you meet a man over-sensitive to the beauties of nature, who insists on discoursing to you of the blue sky and the green meadows,

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even though he speak with warmth and wit, yet he will put you to flight. Let us recognize then that what will not serve in conversation is also valueless in poetry. Description is most often only an idle adornment. It proves that the poet has nothing better to give us, that he is without invention and without a subject."

Hugo temperamentally is satisfied with crude vision—interpretation with him is a matter of ingenious superficial decoration, not of imperious mood. So absolute for Hugo is the mandate to describe that not only his lyrics but even his narrative poems are mainly made up of description. Even in the briefest enumeration of detail he pauses to describe. To tell us that Canute abolished Druidism, he says:

Il abolit l'horreur idolâtre, et la rune,  
Et le menhir féroce où le soir, à la brune,  
Le chat sauvage vient frotter son dos hideux.

The detail is nowise characteristic; it is only a surprise, an arabesque added for ornamentation, and due to a vision that must needs look around the object itself for the accidental data of environment. On a larger scale, in the opening of *Ratbert*, Hugo makes an enumeration of the tyrant's companions serve as a framework for an incidental picture, all in white and black, of the whole age, so that Gautier, an enthusiastic reader, it is true, hailed it as unique: "There is no poetry in the world like that. It is the plateau of the Himalayas. All Italy shines emblazoned in these verses,—and it is words, only words!" he adds exultantly.

The balance between vision and imagination is thus in Hugo quite annulled. His imagination dominates his vision, as it dominates his thought and his feeling. And his imagination has all the intemperance and the infidelity of a master faculty. His art, marked by such surplus of power and such lack of direction, is neither subdued to reality nor pledged to an ideal. It is not in the service of a constant mood that unifies it. Having no loyalty to the thing described, no loving closeness of contact from which could come the charm of convincing simplicity or of habitual exquisiteness, Hugo can be powerful, but it is with something of the violence of the despot and the conqueror marching through nature as through a conquered province. He can even now and then be dainty, but he is seldom so without an infusion of that wanton playfulness of antic imagination which, aiming always at surprise and at effect, ceases perforce to be poetically disinterested. It is indeed the rarest and the greatest surprise of all when he con-

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sents to lose himself in contemplation of the beautiful or the grand and to remain naïve and self-forgetful in its presence. He does so from time to time, fortunately, and the results are apt to belong to the supreme triumphs of descriptive poetry.

When he gives himself up frankly to his primitivism, to his capacity for seeing nature with an almost childlike impressibility and directness of vision, he is at his best. This primitivism is often of an almost startling boldness—so sudden are its effects, and so genuine at the same time. How audacious and how unmodern, yet how profound, the sense of something sentient at the heart of nature in such lines as these:

Comme un arbre inquiet qui sent confusément  
Des ailes se poser sur ses feuilles froissées.

The *Satyre* as a whole seems, to me at any rate, a somewhat pretentious failure, an apotheosis of pure naturalism at the expense of religion, full of false notes and groping ineffectiveness, an attempt to treat a theme quite beyond Hugo's powers. But the *Prologue* is no less distinctly a success, because here the Satyr remains simply a satyr and is not yet a god merged in a philosophic symbol. There runs through these lines the genuine breath of the primitive world, a wild and luxuriant poetry fascinating in its strangeness and its largeness. All the capricious richness of nature is seen here through the veil of the myth-making imagination of early Hellas. Even the pleasantries of Hugo, usually so heavy and of so uninviting a flavor, has here an amiable and playful naturalness.

There are in Hugo's performance occasional passages of a rarer and still more precious quality in which he attains triumphs even higher than those of pure picturesqueness, moments when nature appeals to something that lies deeper in the poet than imagination, to a very genuine substratum of sentiment. *Le Sacre de la Femme* is one of these exceptional achievements. Even as a picture Hugo has done nothing finer. In spite of a few jarring notes, the whole is of surpassing beauty. The poet has wrought one of his most authentic miracles in fixing this vision of the primal dawn in the terrestrial paradise in lines so resplendent in beauty and harmony. His verse has here a more caressing charm, a more voluptuous sweetness of tone than it often knows. The spell under which he writes has stirred the inner depths of his nature, has penetrated to the core of his temperamental self, to a stratum warmed with a very real and potent life, of deliciously sensuous rather than sentimental emotion. This is a mode of feeling



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so paganly primitive that he did not often venture to give it direct expression, though it is perpetually rising to the surface and discharging in unguarded moments into his more decorous poetry, and even issues in a flood of reckless disorder in the "*Chansons des Rues et des Bois*"—*le plus bel animal de la poésie française*—as Veuillot put it. In this unique poem, however, the feeling remains true to its aboriginal type and is not only purely primitive but also primitively pure. *L'ombre était nuptiale, auguste et solennelle*, that is the note which Hugo has so warmly and so poetically sustained throughout—the same note that he sounded with a more reserved and cooler splendor in certain parts of that other masterpiece *Booz Endormi*.

Primitivism of this naïve kind is necessarily among the rarest moods for a modern poet. He can be corruptly naturalistic—no affectation is commoner or more distasteful; to be naïvely so in modern days is an anachronism in which nature must conspire with art. It is so rare that even a dubious Alexandrian after-echo of these earliest nuptial songs of the awakening senses and the awakening heart still stirs us with a strange delight—and half suborns us to confuse a secondary masterpiece like *Daphnis and Chloe* with a masterpiece of a far higher order like *Paul and Virginia*.

But though this primitive strain survives in quite exceptional strength in Hugo, he is far too much the man of letters to be capable of any very prolonged or profound naïveté. Art so rhetorical in its essence as his more or less consciously presupposes an audience. In default of any other, nature herself becomes an audience to him. He thus inevitably leans toward what is of all things most fatal to nature-poetry, unnaturalness and theatricality. These are the prevailing characteristics of his nature-poetry. It subordinates the matter to itself. For Hugo, nature is not a central rallying-point, but only a point of departure. His imagery is a decorative addition to nature, and not a faithful transcript of her charm. Is it May, or is it only the poet's virtuosity, that we see in these elaborate lines:

Voici maintenant  
Que Mai, le mois d'amour, Mai, rose et rayonnant,  
Mai, dont la robe verte est chaque jour plus ample,  
Comme un lévite enfant chargé d'orner le temple,  
Suspend aux noirs rameaux, qu'il gonfle en les touchant,  
Les fleurs d'où sort l'encens, les nids d'où sort le chant?

The image here does not illustrate the reality. The reality is subordinated to the image, and only so much of it is introduced as completes

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the picture, not of May, but of the Levite in the temple. Do we more readily recognize January and November disguised in the following lines as two yelping beasts:

Jappant comme un chien poursuivi par un loup,  
Novembre, dans la brume errant de roche en roche,  
Répond au hurlement de Janvier qui approche?

Or do we finally recognize December in the following:

Il semble que sur moi, secouant son linceul,  
Se soit soudain penché le noir vieillard Décembre?

M. Mabillean finds in Hugo's perceptive faculty "not the passive receptivity of other men, but a retroactive faculty, characterized by effort and tension, and proceeding through contrast to exaggeration, and then by fusion of the resultants to elimination of the real content of perception"—which, translated into unphilosophic English, seems to mean that when Hugo looks he does not always choose to see, or as Brunetière put it, that nature, reflected in the sombre deep of Hugo's imagination, suffers measureless deformation. M. Mabillean, in fact, admits as much: "Taken as a whole," he says, "Hugo's images nowise reproduce the aspects of the world, any more than they express its life."

Yet it is precisely this sort of gratuitous *floriture*, this brilliant but inorganic poetical ornamentation that the *Hugolâtres* have in mind when they praise Hugo as the supreme master of the poetry of nature. Hugo is noteworthy not only for the *image suivie*, but for the *image poursuivie*. He never listened to the discreet monitions of criticism suggesting that it is impossible for the individual detail to be so brilliant without involving the sacrifice of the whole to the part.

Not only the notion, but even the very word simplicity, which summarizes Wordsworth, is in disfavor with Hugo. *Flamboyant* is really the keyword to this luxuriant and jewelled poetry, which may well be described as

Un rayonnement vu dans un flamboiement.

If we are willing to rest content with highly musical verse brimming over with irresponsible and chaotic beauties of this kind, then we have indeed in Hugo a unique artist. Chaotic, however, beauty of this kind necessarily remains, because it is centrifugal. The emphasis is displaced from the central theme to its successive adornments. Instead

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of a single picture, we get a series of fractional ones. In his treatment of nature, as of thought and sentiment, Hugo is disintegrative, proceeding by accumulation of details for the most part as incoherent as they are scintillating. They refuse themselves to organic combination. Consequently nothing is commoner than the dissonant alliance of riotously gay details with a sombre whole. Not only are the details too numerous, but they stand out too boldly, embossing the surface of his poetry with a jagged splendor. Each of them is too prominent and has too much independent existence to melt unobtrusively into the larger picture. Sometimes, even, the poet is content to degenerate into mere enumeration, and simply to heap up in confused luxuriance the raw materials of picturesqueness—in such altisonant verse, for it is in his excesses of virtuosity that Hugo is most conscientiously an artist, that the effect is often more musical even than pictorial. To illustrate this lack of organic unity, take Hugo fairly at his best; take him in a passage at once charmingly musical and finely picturesque. Meditating on the indifference of man to the beauty of nature and to the divinity which it reveals, he says:

Pourquoi dans ce doux mois où l'air tremble attiédi,  
Quand un calice s'ouvre aux souffles du Midi,  
Y plonger, ô Seigneur, l'abeille butinante,  
Et changer toute fleur en cloche bourdonnante?  
Pourquoi le brouillard d'or qui monte des hameaux?  
Pourquoi l'ombre et la paix qui tombent des rameaux?  
Pourquoi le lac d'azur semé de molles îles?  
Pourquoi les bois profonds, les grottes, les asiles?

This verse has considerable beauty, but is there any reason why this eloquent but quite inorganic questioning should not continue indefinitely? Indeed it runs on for a whole page more.

This preference for exhaustive pictorial detail in place of the unique felicitous touch which flashes a whole picture upon us is eminently characteristic of Hugo. He loves to move under full sail, to use all his resources unsparingly. The unquestioning delight we take in this Asiatic luxuriance is an index of the distance that separates our feeling in art and literature from the sobriety and restraint of the ancients. No one could stand at a further remove than Hugo from that discreeter taste which belonged to an age when painting had not yet invaded poetry, and when the poet still had a clear notion of the limits of his art and was content to relegate picturesqueness to its true place

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as a mere accessory, wishing his picture to be so suffused with the larger spirit of the whole as to melt insensibly into it instead of hiding and overlaying it.

In Hugo the onward movement is perpetually suspended by the intervening descriptions. It is very rarely that it carries them along with itself, like a lantern on a flying ship at once illuminating and revealing the motion that is sweeping it forward. To illustrate this subtler art let us adduce an example from Hugo himself, the picture of the drowning sailor in *Les Pauvres Gens*:

Il sent s'ouvrir sous lui l'ombre et l'abîme, et songe  
Au vieil anneau de fer du quai plein de soleil.

Read in its narrative setting, the last line is of an irresistible pathos; the whole life of the mariner is miraculously condensed into one line of supreme poetry. But how much more than simply pictorial are such verses! They go far below the surface on which mere description plays and touch the very essence of things: there is nothing beyond them. They represent the farthest reaches of poetry and penetrate into regions beyond the limits of any rival art. Such a verse is, however, a purely accidental felicity, such as an artist of Hugo's power will inevitably strike off from time to time, quite without the intervention of his conscious taste or his critical faculty. It remains foreign to his poetic ideal and to his general practice.

Just as the symbolists sought to reduce all poetry to a vague musical suggestiveness, Hugo tends to reduce the poetry of nature to a chaotic picturesqueness with no central unity of theme, and too often with no underlying theme at all. What is the much admired *Djinns* but a metric and pictorial *tour de force* triumphantly performed, but as devoid of significance as a peacock's tail? Hugo is quite incapable of the chastened mood of meditation which reads spiritual meaning into nature's phenomena, just as he for the most part refuses himself to that mood of calmness bordering on reflection in which the random impressions of the artist are ordered by the poet's deeper sense of unity.

Hugo remains unselective in his attitude toward natural as toward spiritual phenomena, because he is alike incapable of the depths of feeling and the altitudes of thought by which sight is transformed into insight. His nature poetry is therefore in its very essence chaotic, because nature herself remained for him always a brilliantly variegated chaos.



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This dispersion of the central picture into a series of minor ones, often quite without affinity or correlation, is another proof that Hugo's vision of nature is external and purely artistic, not *intime*, and not truly poetic. In his endless gallery of pictures, how seldom do we feel the soul as well as the eye of the artist present in his handiwork! How seldom do we feel that any line of Hugo's conveys the more precious fruitage of

That inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude!

He has none of that profounder joy in nature which makes her a revelation as well as a spectacle, none of that subtle melancholy which rises from the contemplation of things when the utmost nearness of approach reveals the something alien which forever separates the human spirit from the beauty or the grandeur of its material environment. Neither the thoughts that are too deep for tears, nor the thoughts that are deep enough for tears are familiar to him. He comes always into the presence of nature, camera in hand. It is in vain that he affirms that

Les bois et les champs, du sage seul compris,  
Font l'éducation de tous les grands esprits.

His spirit has found no real education there, but only, or chiefly, training in romantic picturesqueness.

Thus the most purely and persistently picturesque of all poets, and, within material limits, one of the most imaginative, would appear after all to have produced what seems very like a gallery of magnificent failures—we find so much landscape and so few landscapes, so many beauties and so little beauty. However, these are generalizations; and it would be unjust to Hugo, whose work is so full of infinite variety, to fail to note the often brilliant exceptions. The gallery of his paintings is so extraordinarily rich in specimens that we can afford to pass by nine out of ten. The remaining ones are still fairly numerous, and none of them are without really extraordinary merits of detail; and finally from among them we may sift out a still more restricted group which—in their kind—form a little collection of artistic masterpieces, very impressive in beauty and power, though of variable value and seldom quite as flawlessly perfect as the critic might wish.

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What could be more lovely in multiplied attitudes of angelic grace, than Hugo's picture of the Infanta with her rose, a Velasquez done in words? What could be more illusively real than the mirage of the invincible Armada floating on the sombre eyeballs of Philip II, a description where every verse sketches some new feature of the whole, while also offering a new picture in itself, complete and faithfully realistic as a Dutch miniature? To realize the better what marvels Hugo accomplishes here, we have only to oppose to them the vulgar and exaggerated caricature into which he falls in the same poem where he attempts to paint what he could *not* see, the psychic portrait of the king. Even in Hugo's prose-romances what really lives, what really makes us feel the touch of genius, is the descriptions. The one living thing in "Notre-Dame" is the cathedral. In "Les Misérables" how much more real than its inhabitants is the sordid quarter of Paris in which Hugo lodges them! What an epic canvas we have in Hugo's *Waterloo* (and how full even of unintended invention)! In "The Toilers of the Sea" how unforgettable is the cavern where the phantasmal Gilliatt fights the octopus!

Thus Hugo, who, in dealing with thought and sentiment, never really escapes a crumbling fragmentariness, is so great an artist in the field of the picturesque that, at times, and when at his very best, he actually casts off this besetting weakness. In almost every one of his poems we meet with little pictures, thumb-nail sketches as it were, done in the margin of his theme, and full of grace and beauty; for he has the painter's eye which takes in in passing

Une humble marguerite, éclore au bord d'un champ,  
Sur un mur gris, croulant parmi l'avoine folle.

As a painter, his instinct for what is scenic and pictorial and his skill in appropriating it are quite extraordinary and command unstinted recognition. He has an eye for everything in nature, great or small, and his brush is equal to every demand. He can give us a whole painting in a verse:

Les grands chars gémissants qui reviennent le soir.

Les fleuves, passants pleins de lugubres voix,  
Heurtent aux grands quais blancs les glaçons qu'ils charrient.

(Océans) Pleins de mâts frissonnants qui sombrent dans l'azur.

Le beau coq vernissé qui reluit au soleil.

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He has occasional verses, too, though far rarer than the more boldly sketched ones, in which certain fugitive aspects of nature are seized with a delicacy of observation not unworthy of Tennyson.

Et l'on voit tressaillir, épars dans les ramées,  
Le vague arrachement des tremblantes fumées.

Feuilles qui tressaillez à la pointe des branches,  
Nids dont le vent au loin sème les plumes blanches.

His skill, though mainly shown in details, is equal to more sustained efforts also. Occasionally we come upon larger canvases where the colors blend harmoniously and where the picture has both unity and largeness. And, finally, in his most inspired moods, Hugo gives us sometimes boundless landscapes where, with the genuine *furia* of a creative artist, he flings on his canvas, pell-mell, vast fragments of earth and sea and sky, which, under the sheer compulsion of his violent genius, are forced into ensembles of unsurpassable grandeur. In such passages what is only vigor or violence elsewhere becomes genuine power, and when the subject is one which also comports the exercise of his colossal imagination, he even achieves that rarest triumph of latter-day poetry, the sublime. His feeling, in depicting the grander aspects of human nature, is forced and factitious, so that he presents them in an insufferably theatrical light, but the grander aspects of physical nature really stir and rouse him. No poet moves more masterfully in that nebulous region where the physical merges in the infinite and where its fragmentary phenomena melt perforce into a majestic whole. The following lines are a splendid example of Hugo's power when he moves like a giant argosy under full sail furrowing the seas of space.

Je vous atteste, ô vents du soir et de l'aurore,  
Étoiles de la nuit, je vous atteste encore,  
Par l'austère pensée à toute heure asservi,  
Que de fois j'ai tenté, que de fois j'ai gravi,  
Seul, cherchant dans l'espace un point qui me réponde,  
Ces hauts lieux d'où l'on voit la figure du monde!  
Le glacier sur l'abîme ou le cap sur les mers!  
Que de fois j'ai songé sur les sommets déserts,  
Tandis que fleuves, champs, forêts, cités, ruines,  
Gisaient derrière moi dans les plis des collines,  
Que tous les monts fumaient comme des encensoirs,  
Et qu'au loin l'Océan, répandant ses flots noirs,  
Sculptant des fiers écueils la haute architecture,  
Mélait son bruit sauvage à l'immense nature!

Hugo has, even here, fully as much rhetoric as poetry, but of what splendid quality are both! In such moods his flight is so puissant, his power is so victorious, that criticism is almost disarmed and almost willing to forget that these random fragments of poetry are not parts of a consistent and noble whole, and that this sure and steady flight has no goal in view. For a brief instant the poet imposes by the sheer compulsive force of his genius that rapturous ecstasy of admiration which he was so fond of claiming always as his rightful due. For this brief space at least, he seems great beside the greatest, and for once his admirers seem hardly excessive in naming him along with such really great masters in this domain as Lucretius and Dante and Milton.

Now, to object that such pages in Hugo usually have the perfection of painting rather than of poetry may seem at first sight only an empty quibble, since at this height they are great poetry as well as great painting. Yet, the mode of feeling, when Hugo moves in this region, is in general the mode of feeling of the pure painter—it does not go beyond what is confined in the canvas. There is no common bond, no subtle identity running through such passages and attesting an abiding vision colored by personal experience. They have not that diffused poetry which makes every poem of Wordsworth so distinctly Wordsworthian, every canvas of Corot so distinctly a Corot—and which makes us speak of the poetry of his painting. If ever we have the illusion that the picturesqueness of Hugo can give us the same finality of satisfaction poetically as it does pictorially, it is when the characteristic faults of the poet are for the time quiescent, when there is no discordant note to dispel the suggestion of profounder import which we involuntarily associate with any supremely successful rendering of the beauty or the grandeur of nature, but which Hugo is at bottom so impotent to express; it is when the magic of the painting beguiles us to take the implied poetry on faith. Hugo's best pictures have that happy privilege, which belongs to beauty and grandeur, of being intrinsically poetical as well as artistic—if allowed to speak for themselves. But this he rarely allows them to do. In this, as in everything, he has to pay the heavy penalty inevitable to genius allied with a character or intelligence utterly inferior to itself. The moment the poet, so unequal to the painter, intervenes, our illusion of supreme greatness vanishes. He brings his own inferior mood and too often his inept commentary. Here again, as everywhere, Hugo's poetry is vitiated by the disproportionate largeness and insistency with which his



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own figure looms in the landscape. Wordsworth always found God behind nature; Hugo always finds Hugo in front of it. We have to snatch such furtive glimpses of it as we can to the right and to the left of him.

Me voici! C'est moi, rochers, plages!

He makes his triumphal entry on the stage of nature like a favorite actor sure of an ovation, at whose approach the subordinate figures on the boards stand respectfully aside, or array themselves in gracefully auxiliary attitudes around him.

Ouvrez-vous, près où tout soupire;  
Ouvre-toi, bois sonore et doux!  
Celui dont l'âme est une lyre  
Vient chanter dans l'ombre avec vous.

One does not thus stride into a sanctuary, and for Hugo nature is not a sanctuary.

Ivre d'harmonie et d'encens,  
J'entendais, ravissant murmure,  
Le chant de toute la nature  
Dans le tumulte de mes sens!

That is his mood! If Hugo even momentarily thinks of nature as a temple it is that he may set himself up there as a high-priest—or as a God, sometimes a solemn and majestic God, sometimes a *Dieu des bonnes gens* who loves to unbend and show himself debonair and indulgent—especially toward fair sinners.

Nature is not a voice that speaks to him; she is only an enlarging echo of his own voice. She is for him no august mother inspiring a kind of human affection and spoken of with an accent of filial piety; she is for his average mood only a storehouse of poetic stage-properties, among which he chooses and rejects with all the irreverent unconcern of the property-man, a theatre with *coulisses* and greenrooms—where the poet is permitted to stray and utter impertinences, in the form of madrigals. He tells us, it is true, that the Orientals relate that the rose was created white but turned red when Adam looked at it, and he adds: “We are one of those who stand mute in the presence of young girls and of flowers, finding them venerable.” He even claims a special initiation into nature’s mysteries and secret rites, but it proves often to be only the initiation of peeping Tom, boasting of having

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surprised her in unguarded moments. What other nature-poet ever boasted of having seen

Avril avec Tellus pris en flagrant délit,  
Les fleuves recevant les sources dans leurs lits,  
La grenade montrant sa chair sous sa tunique?

or asked such embarrassing questions as this:

Sur l'aube nue et blanche entr'ouvrant sa fenêtre,  
Faut-il plisser la brume honnête et prude, et mettre  
Une feuille de figue à l'astre dans l'azur?

One may admire Theocritus and yet set down as profane and lubric this mania for seeing in nature only a vast *alcôve*, in which

La terre sanglote et souffre  
Livrée aux baisers du gouffre,  
Au viol de l'ouragan.

Is Nature a grisette, and is even the vegetation itself seen in the *parc du Luxembourg* drunk and disorderly,—swelling with sap and intoxication? When Hugo moves about in the apartment of Dame Nature he is always on the lookout for violations of the seventh commandment,

On devine dans l'ombre un tas de mariages  
De l'abeille et du thym, de l'herbe et du rayon,

or at any rate for violations of the proprieties, for seeing applied

La gueule de la nuit aux lèvres de l'aurore.

He views all this moral looseness on the part of nature (and of humanity likewise) with an amiable indulgence. We must not demand too stern a virtue in the world either of the grisettes or of the Grisons.

Hélas! si la Jungfrau avait faim!

He tells us that even the chastest violet carries on her toilet operations in his presence, while the butterfly, that libertine of the azure, brushes gaily against some half-naked flower and does not desist even when the poet passes, but says to the blossom which tries to hide in the turf: Don't be silly—the poet belongs to our household.

A poet who persistently sees nature from this angle (and the vice is ingrained and recurrent) certainly does not belong to the household of Nature in the quality of chaplain. Or is our chaplain perhaps a divine of that now obsolescent type who on festive occasions some-

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times forgot themselves over their cups and uttered unseemly words, but who could else discourse with much wisdom? Can we appeal from Hugo drunk to Hugo sober? Alas! Hugo sober would not be Hugo at all. And an ordered universe would seem to him strangely uninspiring. Nature, pruned and disciplined to human needs, finds no place in his poetical ideal. Order would seem to him a poor compensation for the inexhaustible richness in which his imagination revels. What if it be chaotic, since the materials of a hundred worlds have been flung into this magnificent chaos, in which he feels the pulsation of an endlessly powerful and fecund vitality. It is a world of primitive unrestraint that ignores the narrowing influence of physical or moral bounds, a world in which, as Hugo puts it,

Tout conjugue le verbe aimer,

a world in which

Tout aimait, tout faisait la paire.  
L'herbe à la fleur disait: Nini.

The reader of chastened taste will instinctively turn away to the civilized poets, even though they confine him perhaps to a discreetly ordered garden-close, for he has learned that man's destiny, if he is to live fruitfully, is to live within limits, however much he may feel at times the charm of looking above and beyond them into the void and the wild.

The poetical Titanism of the romanticists, their callow revolt against the necessary limitations of life, was bound to find its analogue in an utter unwillingness to see nature soberly and to accept and interpret her in accordance with the needs and limitations of human nature. Tennyson conjures with the flower in the crannied wall; Hugo, though happily he also has now and then an eye at least for its charm, much prefers Mt. Blanc—or Pelion piled on Ossa. And although he even has, at his best, the poetic power to lift it up and place it there, when he mounts into this aerial pulpit, he has really nothing to say to us that can in any way justify such lofty elevation.

He enjoys the view and describes it magnificently; but the mood it inspires is, poetically considered, trivial. He tries sometimes to be sober, but the wine is still coursing in his veins and his edifying or pathetic outbursts are as suspicious as they are intermittent. There is no dominant and appropriate mood; and there are minor emotional digressions, of obvious insincerity, running off in every direction, often

wantonly incongruous. Half-tones and semi-tints do not exist here, a clashing contrast wildly overleaped replaces the subtly motivated transitions of more temperate poets. In one of his Contemplations Hugo describes his melancholy in the presence of death, his insensibility to nature's offered consolations. His eye, at any rate, is not equally insensible and it dwells upon strange sights.

Les arbres, tout gonflés de printemps, semblent ivres;  
 Les branches, dans leurs doux ébats,  
 Se jettent les oiseaux du bout de leurs raquettes;  
 Le bourdon galonné fait aux roses coquettes  
 Des propositions tout bas.

When our poet-chaplain solemnly adds:

Je songe aux morts, ces délivrés,

one can not help reflecting that while some are melancholy in their cups and others gay, he enjoys the unique privilege of being both at once.

This tendency to the fanciful, that lightest and least sincere form of the imaginative, mars his nature-poetry all the more because it is regularly traversed by the professional prophetic strain. The poem thus becomes dubiously twy-natured, confusedly solemn and antic at once. Neither character is sufficiently sustained to give it a definite tone. It is too solemn to be frankly gay, too light to be truly serious and elevated. It sinks inevitably into mannerism.

When Hugo indulges this lighter vein, the very process of exaggeration by which, in dealing grandly with the grander sides of nature, he sometimes attains to the sublime, leads him in a contrary direction, where far oftener he falls into the *précieux*, the studiously unnatural and the falsely pretty. Nature ceasing to strut, begins to mince. After bestriding the universe like a Rhodian colossus, she awkwardly tries to contract herself into the tiny span of an agate on the forefinger of an alderman. We have stumbled upon Polyphemus inditing madrigals, upon Hercules making himself agreeable in the Hotel Rambouillet.

Fontenelle was praised by one of his contemporaries as the first poet who had ascribed to a brook sensibility to the charms of a meadow. This same brook flows through the midst of Hugo's nature-poetry. The imaginative Hugo is a brilliant successor of the prosaic Fontenelle. Although he reassuringly says to us:



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Ne vous étonnez pas de tout ce que me dit  
La nature aux soupirs ineffables. Je cause  
Avec toutes les voix de la mététempsychose,

yet, when he approaches nature, we feel something of the same awed expectation that assails us in the presence of the prestidigitator who breaks six eggs into a silk hat and in six seconds draws out a blooming oleander. It is not everyday poetry—far from it. We murmur with Goethe's Gretchen: This is uncanny!

This defect, always present, is somewhat subdued in Hugo's earlier period, when he was so intensely and gloomily conscious of his civilizing mission. During his exile and in his last years it becomes all-pervasive. It has very nearly spoiled the "Chansons des Rues et des Bois," in which nature is not only treated lightly, but is actually profaned and defiled.

The serious burden of poetry is quite lost under such fancifulness. In "Toute la Lyre," Hugo speaks of a little church overgrown by a gigantic vine.

Un lierre monstrueux à tige arborescente,  
Qui sort de l'herbe ainsi qu'une griffe puissante,  
Comme un des mille bras de Cybèle au front vert,  
Semble, en ce champ aride et de ronces couvert,  
Avoir un jour saisi l'église solitaire  
Et la tirer d'en bas lentement dans la terre.

The poet's attention is at once seized and monopolized by the disparity: he is not interested by the church as a church nor by the vine as a vine, but by their physical relation, and straightway the vine becomes a monstrous claw pulling the church down into the earth! The poet does not stop to ask himself whether such sickly imaginings can perform any function of true poetry, or whether they can even please as pictures. The fine frenzy that should dwell in the poet's eye has passed to his tongue. He is possessed by the devil of picturesqueness and must needs rave in rhyme till the fit is passed. This love of picturesque effects, irrespective of any human values, this love of reading in nature's book the mere letters, without trying to make them into words and ideas, is a dominant characteristic of Hugo's nature-poetry. The moral ideas which he so often awkwardly intertwines with the picturesque substance of his verse may at first sight seem to indicate the contrary, but it is only too evident that they are merely the framework on which he trains his imaginative vegetation. They are only

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sticks without life. In an ostensibly philosophic poem, in "Toute la Lyre," Hugo consumes sixty lines in simply fixing the time of the action:

Souvent quand minuit sonne . . .  
A cette heure où l'Atlas . . .  
Pendant qu'Ormuz . . .  
Pendant que le penseur . . .  
A cette heure sacrée . . .  
Ou plus tard . . .  
Moi, pendant que tout rêve . . .

Sixty lines, full of pictures, to tell us that the poet—did what?

Je songe au bord des eaux, triste; alors les pensées  
Qui sortent de la mer, d'un vent profond poussées,  
Filles de l'onde, essaim fuyant,  
Que l'âpre écume apporte à travers ses fumées,  
M'entourent en silence et de leurs mains palmées  
M'entr'ouvrent le livre effrayant!

and with these six lines the poem ends! The book of Nature has been brought in with great pomp and ceremony; it has been opened with a hieratic gesture,—but the poet omits to read a single word from it. One is irresistibly tempted to ask: Can he read it?

Corresponding to the moral confusion resulting from the romantic identification of man and nature, there is an æsthetic confusion resulting from the failure to draw a proper line of distinction between the two. As has been well said: Hugo humanizes nature and naturalizes man. He ascribes motives, morals, reason, volition and speech to inanimate things, while his human creations—who are singularly ill-provided with all these attributes (except speech)—seem blind forces pushed by a resistless wind of fatality.

Je suis une force qui va,

says Hernani, giving us the key to all these human pieces of mechanism. But observe how Hugo's humanity moves about in a world peopled by humanitarian oak-trees, philosophic vegetation, beneficent asses and eloquent oxen, which, if man could only heed their voices, would infallibly guide him to perfect goodness, wisdom and happiness.

L'âme du genre humain songeait à s'en aller,  
Mais, avant de quitter à jamais notre monde,  
Tremblante, elle hésitait sous la voûte profonde,  
Et cherchait une bête où se réfugier.

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She has chosen the jackass—and remains serenely satisfied with this fixed residence. This fantastic religiosity, a form of romantic primitivism, pervades and distorts all nature:

L'homme frissonnant voit les arbres en prière  
Et les monts sérieux;  
Le chêne ému fait signe au cèdre qui contemple;  
Le rocher rêveur semble un prêtre dans le temple  
Pleurant un déshonneur;  
L'araignée, immobile au centre de ses toiles,  
Médite, et le lion, songeant sous les étoiles,  
Rugit: Pardon, Seigneur!

This is not altogether new, but we had never, before Hugo thus unconsciously caricatured it, been made to feel so keenly the fallacy underlying the romantic confusion of man and nature. Hugo takes all this with a terrible literalness.

Le chien, c'est la vertu  
Qui, ne pouvant se faire homme, s'est faite bête.

It seems as though all that quantum of goodness still to be desiderated in the human breast were already developed and over-brimming in the sermonizing stones and running brooks, in the hearts of plants and beasts and boulders.

Pas de bête qui n'ait un reflet d'infini.

Even the knowledge of God and the hereafter seems to have been lodged at the wrong address:

A travers le taillis de la nature énorme,  
Flairant l'éternité de son museau difforme,  
Là, dans l'ombre à tes pieds, homme, ton chien voit Dieu!

M. Faguet says that Hugo had enough soul to give some to stones but not enough to give any to man. We must not let this clever epigram mislead us. The kind of soul that can be given to stones is not the same kind as can be given to man. It is not soul, it is only life that Hugo can give to stones. He merely dramatizes nature. The morality that he gives her is not of the kind with which she is suffused by a poetic idealism seeking a body to lodge in; it is only one of the many categories into which Hugo transposes nature to make it striking,

La nature est un drame avec des personnages.

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Our own eighteenth century poets used to believe that they personified all the vices and virtues by the easy process of spelling them with a capital letter and making them comport themselves as if they were proper nouns. The capital letters at least served the purpose of warning us. Hugo believes that, in order to personify natural objects, it is only necessary to make them act like persons. In reality the matter is not quite so simple. The two worlds of man and nature are like two contiguous properties. To extend the one it is necessary to encroach on the domain of the other; and the encroachment, if it is to be a peaceful one, must be made so imperceptibly as to arouse no sense of usurpation; it must seem negligible. It must be made, as it were, with the virtual complicity of the power usurped upon. In this conquest, in this steady humanization of nature, which has been going on since the beginning of time, the progression has been as imperceptible as the motion of the dial's hand. By common consent of mankind brooks murmur, trees whisper, winds whistle, the ocean moans, the violet is modest, and the rose is proud. These are the commonplaces of poetry, the raw materials which the poet finds ready to his hand and on which it is his function to operate—with discretion. He must make us believe what is only fancy's feigning, and he can do so only by first making himself believe it. His art is, humorously speaking, a subtle form of contagious hypnosis. Hugo, however, will accept neither limitation in the choice of his materials nor discretionary proviso regarding the use of them. His range is universal and the freedom he arrogates is absolute. He contests nature's title, declares her whole realm forfeit and annexed, and proposes to rule it as an absolute despot. The waters shall murmur whatever message he has in his mind, the trees shall whisper whatever theory he has to propound, the wind shall whistle whatever tune he chooses, and the flowers shall comport themselves as he may decree.

L'eau, palpitant sous le chant qui l'effleure,  
Baise avec un sanglot le vieux saule qui pleure;  
. . . le dur tronc d'arbre a des airs attendris.

L'élégant peuplier vers le saule difforme  
S'incline; et le buisson caresse l'antré, l'orme  
Au sarment frissonnant tend ses bras convulsifs.

Les constellations, sombres lettres de feu,  
Sont les marques du bain à l'épaule du monde.

He violently imposes a given situation, mood, opinion or utterance upon nature, however innocent she may be of it. He puts her to the



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torture and wrings from her a confession of complicity in his conspiracies of unnaturalness: he dictates; she repeats him to the echo.

A leaf of irregular shape, which growing elsewhere would be only a leaf, and which even if it grew near the scaffold of Montfaucon, would still be only a leaf for us, becomes for Hugo a frightful black stigma, the shadow of the hangman's five fingers cast on the wall.

Hugo treats nature with the same despotic violence as he does his vocabulary and his imagery. It is a tyranny as inexorable as Napoleon's, as high-fantastical as Nero's, and we might add as old as the hills—had not the Manicheans anticipated Hugo by two thousand years when they asserted that figs wept at being plucked and that the tree bewailed their loss with milky tears?

Hugo makes everything live our life and act our acts. He aims at arousing our wonder, but oftener he arouses our incredulity. If inanimate things are human, the beasts are super-human. Take, for example, that long string of donkeys that files through his works. One of them knows more about God than the centenarian prophet who rides him, a second argues the philosopher Kant into shameful silence, a third is proclaimed holier than Socrates and greater than Plato, a fourth one has direct commerce with divinity,

Songeant

Dans une profondeur où l'homme ne va pas.

The poet wanders in perpetual lyric delirium in this world of over-animated nature, where the dead things are all alive and where the living things are all convulsive with an energy which they can not contain. Hugo's world, compared with God's, is over-energized. It is a world full of the dramatic and of the marvelous; but what should be the underlying principle of this poetic stage-craft is quite forgotten, namely, that the marvelous does not impose itself out of hand but requires to be accredited by the subtle witchery of art. Hugo always baldly asserts what other poets delicately try to persuade us of.

Un crapaud regardait le ciel, bête éblouie,  
Grave il songeait: l'horreur contemplait la splendeur.

This toad has assuredly not escaped out of the Fables of La Fontaine; it is decidedly a latter-day romantic toad. How much more plausible is the genial fabulist's hare:

Un lièvre en son gîte songeait;  
Car que faire en un gîte à moins que l'on n'y songe?

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Hugo asserts, he does not explain. A meditative toad is the most natural of all things—in his world—except, perhaps, an unmeditative priest or philosopher.

Trouvant les tremblements de terre trop fréquents,  
Les rois d'Espagne ont fait baptiser les volcans . . .  
Les volcans n'ont rien dit et se sont laissé faire,  
Et le Momotombo lui seul n'a pas voulu.

Thus begins in Hugo this Indian legend, and in the same vein it runs on. Asked why it refuses baptism, the volcano thus comports itself:

La montagne interrompt son crachement de lave,  
Et le Momotombo répond d'une voix grave.

Hugo forgets that imagination is not the final justification of poetry. He overwhelms us with lawless conceits and images till we sigh for a simple and sincere line, for an utterance coming straight from the heart without having been held over in the imagination to be painted and lacquered. We would sometimes prefer that a song should be merely a song and not a bird, that a tree should be merely a tree and not a monster, and that a poet should be merely a poet and not a prestidigitator. But habitually in Hugo's world

Ce qu'on prend pour un mont est une hydre; ces arbres  
Sont des bêtes; ces rocs hurlent avec fureur;  
Le feu chante; le sang coule aux veines des marbres.  
Ce monde est-il le vrai? le nôtre est il l'erreur?  
O possibles qui sont pour nous les impossibles!

This defect vitiates fundamentally Hugo's nature-poetry: there is scarcely a page that does not furnish some example of it. He does not see that, if nature is not to renounce her own identity, the human disguise we thrust upon her must never be quite complete. The poet must stop mid-way.

This law of measure Hugo violates perpetually, on occasion with such triumphant violence that we are constrained to acknowledge that he has succeeded in doing what no other poet would have dared, more often still with at least enough success to make criticism hesitate between praise and blame, but in the overwhelming majority of cases with such purely mechanical distortion of nature's proprieties as is possible only to the confirmed rebel against tradition, who believes that to him it has been given to renew the very foundations of art.

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In inspired moments his wayward fantasies are taken up by his potent imagination and transformed and glorified, and we are delightfully startled by such lines as these on the crescent moon:

Et Ruth se demandait,  
Quel dieu, quel moissonneur de l'éternel été,  
Avait, en s'en allant, négligemment jeté  
Cette faucille d'or dans le champ des étoiles.

But for one figure that is felicitously bold there are at least a score that are infelicitous and over-bold, and we pay at every turn for our random delights the penalty of suffering such things as this:

Qu'après avoir dompté l'Athos, quelque Alexandre,  
Sorte de héros, monstre aux cornes de taureau,  
Aille donc relever sa robe à la Jungfrau!  
Comme la vierge, ayant l'ouragan sur l'épaule,  
Crachera l'avalanche à la face du drôle!

Truly the penalty is a heavy one. But, his admirers say, this is only the inevitable overflow of a boundlessly rich imagination—if it cast a shadow on his page, it is the shadow of a Himalaya. Are they in the right? In this unsparing and unscrupulous personification of all inanimate things there is in most cases not an excess of imaginative power but rather a deficiency of it. Hugo has substituted a mechanical process for what is one of the most truly creative manifestations of the romantic genius, the investing of nature with a vaguely human quality, with an atmosphere of mysterious suggestiveness. Hugo has no temperamental affinity for the Celtic twilight. To its dim haze he prefers either glaring clarity or formless night. The universe is really mysterious for him only where it is so for us all, where it merges into the physical infinite or melts into the void of darkness. There is no sense of nature's mystery, but a most distinct lack of it, in the over-bold personifications that Hugo revels in. Nature when half-humanized is brought near to us so that we apprehend her mystery, but nature when she is wholly humanized is brought so very near to us that we see she is masquerading; we are confronted no longer by a mystery but only by a mystification. There is so much artifice that there is no place for art in fancies like these:

Un orme, un hêtre, anciens du vallon, arbres frères  
Qui se donnent la main des deux rives contraires,  
Semblent, sous le ciel bleu, dire: A la bonne foi!

Un houx noir qui songeait près d'une tombe, un sage,  
M'arrêta brusquement par la manche au passage.

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Tous ces monts radieux . . .  
S'éveillaient, étonnés, dans le blanc crépuscule,  
Et, regardant Roland, se souvenaient d'Hercule.

Les grilles de l'enfer s'empourpraient, le courroux  
En faisaient remuer d'eux-mêmes les verrous.

The poet seeks a rustic hovel:

Un arbre, de sa branche où brillait une goutte,  
Sembla se faire un doigt pour me montrer la route,  
Et le vent, m'en ouvrit la porte.

La faim passe bientôt sa griffe sous la porte,  
Décroche un vieux manteau, saisit la montre, emporte  
Les meubles.

In this world we are not at home—nor is nature!

For centuries man has cultivated the faculty of finding in nature an ever increasing beauty. A poet who should find roses ugly and sunset hideous and the starry heavens an extinguisher would be abnormal—or affected. The healthy reader need feel no compunction in turning away from Baudelaire's wilful nightmares in disgusted bewilderment. He is at one with the instinct of his race in seeking the beautiful in nature and in extracting a refined pleasure from it; and he is so likewise in finding here—for where shall he find it if not here?—a receptacle for the overflow of his heart and his imagination, a world of symbols for the expression of that vision of beauty which the troubled waters of life so seldom consent to mirror directly. But it is not every page of nature's book that concords with the demands of this poetic orthodoxy that has been so gradually growing up. The pages that do not man rightfully ignores, or reads only with remote curiosity. Hugo, corruptly primitive, refuses to select, and declares the whole book equally inspired, forgetting that it is man who himself inspires it in the measure of his spiritual needs. Hugo finds our orthodoxy insufferably narrow, because he refuses to understand the law of selection—and the rejection by humanity of what it does not need and can not fruitfully appropriate. He delights in thrusting upon us what by common consent we have ruled out as apocryphal; but he does not in any degree succeed in reading the spirit of our creed into the rejected texts that he so loudly proclaims canonical. Therefore the devotee of nature can not but look askance at his innovating practice; and, above all, in moods too sacred to admit of mere idle curiosity or of morbid æsthetic expatiation he will turn away as resolutely as ever from the ugly, the monstrous, and the sinister, to worship at the old



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shrine of beauty. Just as man's religious instinct has always refused to accept as a finality the evil that is in man, so his poetic instinct refuses to accept as a finality the unredeemed and sinister side of nature. We take refuge in the only solution possible, that of ignoring it and of living in the light of what we can understand and revere, of whatever is beautiful and harmonious. How different is the world of nature as painted in Hugo's pages!

Mais je fais peu de cas de tout ce bleu superbe,  
De ce vaste sourire épanoui sur tout,  
De cette grâce où l'ombre en clarté se dissout,  
De ces flots de cristal, de ces ondes de moire;  
Et le passage affreux du tonnerre est ma gloire.

Hugo does not realize that the thunder is not a fruitful subject for poetry.

We find ourselves here in the midst of a nature which usually lacks sympathetic appeal and often even naturalness.

Il semble en ces noirs chemins,  
Que les hommes ont des branches,  
Que les arbres ont des mains.

Among the animals it is the serpent, the lion, the tiger, the hydra, the dragon that he seems most to affect. Those that represent gentleness or beauty are far rarer apparitions in his work. So in the vegetal world it is the trees, especially the contorted and gloomy ones, the serpentine vines, the unpruned and all-obscuring growths of wild nature that he constantly recalls and that he dwells on far more affectionately than the plants and flowers that hint of the nearer neighborhood of man and that are more akin to our habitual moods. The barren mountain-peak, the beetling precipice, the wild ravine, the boulder, the brawling stream, the tempestuous ocean, the lightning and the thunder, these fit into Hugo's customary themes far more than the pastoral slope, the enamelled mead, the peaceful stream, so dear to more classic poets and to those whose insight tells them that the nature with which we are in near and friendly contact can alone offer us the illusion of fruitful human values, while all the rest can appeal only to the curious eye and to the roving spirit. Hugo and Wordsworth have, as it were, divided the natural world between them. The one is a good shepherd who leads his flocks by the still waters: the other is a rebellious Titan who aspires to the thunderbolt of Zeus, the earth-shaking trident of Neptune, the gloom-shrouded throne of Pluto. Hugo's cult of the ugly and

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the grotesque leads him to give them special prominence, to make nature at one moment beautiful, the next moment grimacing and hideous. He draws from her impressive nightmares and potent hallucinations. He insists on seeing in her a tenebrous, ghastly, and even satanic side.

Quelle muette horreur dans les halliers obscurs!  
Les pleurs noirs de la nuit sur la colombe blanche  
Tombent; le vent met nue et torture la branche;  
Quel monologue affreux dans l'arbre aux rameaux verts!  
Quel frisson dans l'herbe! Oh! quels yeux fixes ouverts  
Dans les cailloux profonds, oubliettes des âmes!

L'épouvante est au fond des choses les plus belles.

Here is a description of nocturnal landscape seen through the windows of a stage-coach—it is seen sometimes more tamely, but assuredly never more wildly, through the windows of Bedlam. Like the poet in "Candida," Hugo has the 'orrors—poetic 'orrors, let us hasten to add.

"The carriage-lamps cast a ghastly glimmer on the backs of the horses that makes them assume monstrous shapes; at intervals ferocious mops of hair crowning the elms appear and disappear suddenly in the brightness . . . the bushes crouch in a hostile attitude; the heaps of stones look like prostrate corpses; one sees only dimly; the trees in the plain are no longer trees, they are hideous giants that seem to advance slowly toward the roadside; each old wall looks like an enormous and toothless jaw. Suddenly a spectre flits past with outstretched arms. By day it would be only a guide-post honestly proclaiming: *Road from Coulommiers to Sézanne*. By night it is a horrid apparition that seems to utter curses against the traveler. And then, I know not why, one's fantasy swarms with images of reptiles; it is as if serpents were crawling in one's brain; the thornbush hisses from the roadside like a cluster of asps; the postilion's whip is a winged viper that follows the carriage and seeks to sting you through the window-glass; far off in the mist, the line of the hills undulates like the belly of a boa constrictor in the throes of digestion, and to the somnolent and exaggerating fancy takes on the form of a dragon circling the whole horizon. The wind moans like a weary Cyclops and makes one dream of some ghastly toiler laboring in pain in the darkness."

The legitimacy of gratuitously making the universe a chamber of horrors, a Bluebeard's closet multiplied to infinity, none of the apostles of the ugly in art have ever succeeded in establishing—Hugo no more

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than the rest. His point of view is developed with particular clearness in the poem *A Albert Dürer*:

Une forêt, pour toi, c'est un monde hideux.  
... Rien n'est tout à fait mort ni tout à fait vivant.  
... Aux bois, ainsi que toi, je n'ai jamais erré,  
Maître, sans qu'en mon cœur l'horreur ait pénétré.  
... J'ai senti, moi qu'échauffe une secrète flamme,  
Comme moi palpiter et vivre avec une âme,  
Et rire, et se parler dans l'ombre à demi-voix,  
Les chênes monstrueux qui remplissent les bois.

In invoking Dürer, Hugo is not on very safe ground. "Melanchthon relates that Dürer often regretted that he had been too much attracted in his younger days by variety and the fantastic and had only understood nature's simple truth and beauty later in life."

The poet who sees the beautiful in nature sees it with a constant eye. It was the ultra-romanticists, the representatives of the kind of romanticism that Goethe shrewdly designated as sickly art, who cultivated the abnormal faculty of seeing alternately dominant beauty and dominant horror in the same landscape. When this capacity is genuinely emotional, so that the nightmare is not only a vision but a sensation, commingling a nameless horror with the very delight which beauty inspires, it may without hesitation be set down as pathologic; that way madness lies. We may relegate such poetry to the serious attention of the young collegians who have not yet outgrown the Baudelaire stage. A study of Hugo's work, however, the product of a robustly healthy poet, makes it seem quite inadmissible that these tributes to the Muse of shaken nerves are in his case other than voluntary. They are purely the products of his picturesque imagination. They have none of the complicated subtlety, none of the diseased and dolorous emotionality that belong to the morbidly visionary, and that color the work of such poets as Lenau and James Thomson. Hugo's remarkable power of visualization made it possible for him to recombine into fantastic horrors the elements that nature furnished. He could with perfect ease treat himself to a well-conditioned nightmare, and, seated comfortably at his desk, he rather enjoyed the process—it did not upset his nerves, and he had, to say the least, a Chinese fondness for these curious distortions. In short, he cultivated them.

His cultivation bore abundant fruits. From the time of the later Contemplations, the very time of his poetic maturity, nature has al-

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most ceased to be beautiful for Hugo: he sees in it so much that is ugly, fantastic and monstrous, and, it ought to be added, he sees these things with growing power. The delicate tints, never very prodigally used in his poetry, give place more and more to bold color effects, to the flamboyant, and to clashing contrasts of black and white. Nature's music, to which his ear was never much attuned, gives place more and more to nature's noises. It is the antipodes of Shelley's poetry. The merely fantastic, so abundant from the start, becomes more and more the monstrous and the limitless. The poet feels cramped even in infinity itself, a natural enough culmination of a devouringly descriptive and pictorial attitude.

Je veux tout le ciel bleu, je veux tout 'le ciel noir,  
L'infini par moments me semble à peine avoir  
La dimension de mon antre.

The poet has ended by seeing nature with a hallucinated eye, its plastic forms lawlessly shifting and re-shaping themselves in the dim penumbra of his imagination, which welcomes the ugly and the monstrous on the same terms as the beautiful and which revels with a wanton delight in their yet unexhausted and often unexplored power of suggestiveness. That he could for the time being surrender himself sufficiently to these visions to make them imaginative realities without being affected by them also as emotional realities is another proof that he viewed nature with the painter's and not with the poet's eye.

In his later poetry he also sees best in the dark and he exploits to the utmost this feline faculty. He tells us that he particularly loved to roam abroad in the twilight because then nature puts on deformed and fantastic shapes. The ever-recurring rhymes *ombre* and *sombre* become ultimately the keywords of his poetry. Whatever is vaguely tenebrous and mysterious, he throws on his canvas with often appalling realism. He has deserted his early master Virgil (who I feel never deeply influenced him) for Dante—the Dante of Gustave Doré. Hugo also seems to see most clearly in tumult. There is nothing he describes with such all-embracing grasp and vivid power as the giant forces of nature let loose, nature when it is not simply a drama but a melodrama. There is nothing in which his imagination revels more exultantly than the physical universe in its most excited aspects, the great convulsions of nature, volcanoes, hurricanes, whirling planets and burning meteors, conflagrations and convulsions, and all the manifold apparitions of submarine and superteraqueous monsters. In such a turbulent uni-



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verse, the dazzled eye often seeks in vain for repose, and the dismayed spirit sighs more often still for a breath of calm.

When he deals with things whose vastness and whose horror defy description he confidently takes up the challenge and often triumphs over the impossible. If he can not give us the letter he snatches at the spirit, and pursues with a nearer approach than any rival the wildest and the most inapprehensible phenomena of nature. His violence of tone, so disproportionate and at times almost brutal, is here more adequate than any less audacious manner could be. It is this that makes *Ibo* seem such a supreme success to those readers who can view its Titanism apart from its thought. But this region of wild commotion and unreclaimed force and limitless spaces is one less fitted for human beings than for "stormy Titans."

Parmi ces mondes, fauve, accourant à grand bruit,  
Une comète aux crins de flamme, aux yeux de foudre,  
Surgit, et les regarde, et, blême, approche et luit;  
Puis s'évade en hurlant, pâle et surnaturelle,  
Traînant sa chevelure éparsée derrière elle,  
Comme une Canidie affreuse qui s'enfuit.

Repose and calm—these are among the choicest gifts that poetry can bring to us. But for them Hugo had no special gift, no spiritual affinity. He did not feel that in the contrast of nature's calm with man's agitation lay the great charm and the principal justification of the otherwise somewhat barren preoccupation with things rather than man so characteristic of romanticism when it seeks to escape from pure subjectivity. This chief sanction of our modern nature-poetry becomes an almost negligible element in our final estimate of Hugo; so slight and so progressively vanishing an element is it in his work. He chose rather to oppose to man's unrest and agitation the unrest and agitation of nature, and to be the painter of all that is shadowy, disquieting, and untamed to the use and the measure of man. Thus although he humanizes nature, he does so through the medium of more or less grimacing caricatures, without making it either nearer or clearer, less alien or less chaotic, because, viewing it only with the lawless fancy, he brings to it no nobler mood than that of the pure artist fluctuating with all the impartiality of spiritual impotence between intermittent visions of her beauty and her deformity.

Must we not then conclude that Hugo is a great descriptive artist rather than a great nature poet? He has reproduced with splendor

and with spirit, if not with patient fidelity, the spectacle of nature, and he has above all recombined the elements it offered into new pictures with marvelous imaginative virtuosity. His work is the product of a great painter (with a manifest leaning to the rococo school), who has ransacked the universe and who comes home to us with bursting portfolios, containing a few finished landscapes and innumerable sketches and studies and fragmentary hints. But has not this rich and inventive painter suffered a fundamental frustration? We ask ourselves in vain what all this stands for. These pictures remain only pictures, not illuminating symbols; this art is not interpretative, nor is it loyal and simple and warmed with true love of nature. It is only a prodigiously brilliant manifestation of art for art's sake.

## CHAPTER V

### SENTIMENT

Sucht nur die Menschen zu verwirren,  
Sie zu befriedigen ist schwer.

GOETHE

THE variations of criticism, which are so common and so disconcerting in the current judgments of Hugo's work as a whole, appear also, though somewhat less marked, in the discussion of Hugo as a poet of sentiment. Even the startling aberration of Vinet, who declared that few French poets offered so many verses, "coming straight from the heart," has found occasional echo in later criticism. It is true that the touchstone of Musset's and Lamartine's poetry has in general preserved the French reader from blunders of this magnitude. Yet the sonorous eloquence and the luxuriant imagery with which Hugo has poetized the commonplaces of sentiment have afforded to his readers such intensity of artistic delight that they have often condoned and overlooked the failure of his poetry to yield satisfaction of a deeper kind.

Such satisfaction Hugo, as a poet of sentiment, is radically incapable of yielding. A nature so fundamentally self-assertive and so materialistic, so lacking at once in introspective subtlety and in spontaneous sympathies, was destined to feel in a manner either over-refined or vulgar, and to render what it felt in a manner which is, at its worst, theatrical, and, at its best, somewhat coldly artistic.

Why it is that Hugo's sentimental verse affects us as having, despite all its exciting qualities, a pervading dryness? He certainly can not be characterized as lacking in temperament. The common notion that he lacked sensibility of any kind is more specious than just; and we know now that he lived, as exclusively as any poet ever did, in the region of the senses. He spent himself daily and hourly in the pursuit of sensation. Within the narrow limits set by his egotism his feeling is often intense. His love for his children is a sentiment in which he dwelt with unabating delight and which he has sung with genuine charm. His elegies on the death of the daughter so prematurely and tragically lost, are monuments of a grief which certainly lacks nothing in intensity of expression. His attachment to Juliette, though

intensely egotistic always, persisted for half a century in spite of certain rather vexatious traits of her character, and indicates a more than ordinary capacity for sustained passion. Perhaps not even Pope himself felt the pin-pricks of adverse criticism with a more quivering sensibility; and, finally, the scorching hate that burns in the "Châtiments" is, in itself alone, a more than sufficient attestation that Hugo is, in his way, very decidedly a man of feeling.

The impression that Hugo lacks sensibility is mainly due to the fact that his sensibility is purely masculine. The feminine elements of sympathy, tenderness, delicacy, are strangely lacking. His feeling wants a fundamental sweetness. On that side he is indeed cold. But in its violently self-assertive forms, how powerful, how vibrant, how constant and unblunted his sensibility remains! How it throbs in the heat-lightnings of his style, even in his latest work! How it wraps itself like a Nessus-tunic around every idea that he handles and every object that he views! If he does not know the feminine self-abandonment of love, what intensity of hate and what madness of self-love he displays! And what magnificent ferocity burns in the eye of the old lion when a rival invades his forest-preserves or when an enemy nears his lair!

Nevertheless, it is undeniably true that in his poetry the expression of sentiment for the most part leaves us unsatisfied. The reason is, not that he lacks sentiment, but that his sentiment is not of a poetical kind. He feels more than ordinary mortals do, but he does not feel very differently. All the commonplaces of sentiment, those at which the sophisticated balcony smiles while the unspoiled gallery applauds, Hugo iterates and reiterates in their baldest forms with unabating unctiousness and fervor. How ready he is to descant on the dress once worn by a child that has died, or on a mother's love for her babe. His sentiment is that of a bourgeois, though of a bourgeois artist. It does not lack body, but it lacks fineness. It lacks the fineness of quality that lifts the poet's passion above the every-day plane and gives it the beauty of a dream self-sustained amid the drab commonplace of life.

Hugo was doubtless in some degree conscious of this defect. The sincerest homage he has paid to Musset and to Lamartine is an occasional attempt to transcend the limitations of his own habitual manner and to approximate theirs; but the groping exaggeration that marks such efforts shows plainly how foreign to him is the sentimental grace of the one or the intensely lyric passion of the other.



To obviate the disadvantages under which he labors, and to make passion of an essentially bourgeois flavor literary and, as far as may be, poetical, Hugo recognized the necessity of giving it heightened expression, of making it eloquent. He recognized also that the only device for dissimulating its everyday nature is to clothe it with every variety of outer adornment. He treats passion theatrically and depends on declamation, costuming and scenic accessories for effects. Especially in dealing with the intenser passions his manner is theatrically rather than humanly moving. His effects are not incidental but are distinctly aimed at and led up to, they have an air of being placed and timed. That supreme seal of impassioned poetry, unpremeditated pathos, is denied him. The *Tristesse d'Olympio* has more beauties of detail, more mere artistry than Lamartine's *Lac* or Musset's *Souvenir*, yet how its slow elaborateness savors throughout of the conscious rather than the inspired artist.<sup>1</sup> Thus Hugo is constrained to renounce the genuine aim of the poet, the impassioned interpenetration of truth and beauty, and he pays the penalty by his inability to rise above the region of the senses and to give to his utterance any hint of impersonal significance. His feeling, imprisoned in the senses, does not prolong itself, independently of the reality that produced it, like a lingering echo. He does not brood upon it and caress it till it becomes one with his inmost nature, till it becomes a beautiful dream inviting rapturous lyric expression, a symbol wreathing and twining itself about whatever is highest in his spirit. It remains, under all the extraneous ornament thrown about it, earth-born and a thing of earth, essentially crude and untransformed, grossly human and purely natural in the aboriginal sense of the word. He is thus reduced to operate upon it as mere matter of art, as a material clay to be consciously manipulated and shaped according to the caprices of fancy, or to treat it as a framework only factitiously related to the poetry wrought upon it, as a sort of armature to be overlaid by the marvels of cunning skill expended upon what is far less precious than itself. Sentiment in Hugo is often degraded to the office of the canvas on which his pictures are painted. *Materiem superabat opus*.

Thus feeling is in Hugo's poetry a starting-point rather than a

<sup>1</sup> The critic (like Brunetière) who can put such a poem on a par with its rivals, and even prefer it, has unwittingly given the measure of his limitations as a judge of lyric poetry. The *Lac* is one of those unique accidents in the history of poetry in which perfection is once for all achieved. The *Tristesse* is a splendid effort—in which the effort is quite as apparent as the splendor.

finality. It is only a pretext, though often a sincere and plausible one, for eloquence and imagery, for into these he invariably translates it. Hence he nearly always presents it to us suffering from the disadvantages attendant on translation: stiffness and unfaithfulness. Hugo seems unwilling ever to render it in its native simplicity. He regularly substitutes a series of rhetorical and figurative equivalents—for to so fertile an artist a great number usually suggest themselves, and he is reluctant to reject any. The poem, instead of offering the beginning, the middle, and the end of a poetic mood, seldom gets beyond the fugacious gleam of sentiment which allured the poet's more powerful faculties into action. The richness and variety with which he expresses it are confined entirely to the formulation of the theme, the theme itself is oftenest both insubstantial and fractional. Sometimes even, so fond is Hugo of the ingenious devices of stage-craft, the theme remains hidden behind a tantalizing drop-curtain, which rises only to give us an artistically postponed and fleeting glimpse of it in a picturesque tableau at the end. More commonly, it marches in chill and solitary state at the head of a long and splendid retinue of metaphors,—and at other times, again, like the unhappy bride in Hugo's *ballade*, we patiently wait till the long procession of images has filed past, only to learn at last that the object of our prolonged expectation is not there at all. Like a true devotee (*malgré lui*) of art for art's sake, Hugo exhausts himself on the accessories.

His sentimental poetry lacks accent, it lacks depth. It conveys no impression of spontaneity—hardly even in the "Châtiments." It offers too much suggestion of conscious art, of manipulation, of striving after an effect which the poet is aware is not inherent in the feeling itself and which he labors to put into the expression. This conflict of the artist against the impotence imposed upon him by the unpoetic quality of his nature, results in a constant suggestion of strain and tension. Contrast his work with any random page of so spontaneous a poet as Musset, and the difference stands out palpably. Hugo is a dramatic artist trying before his mirror the various facial expressions and gestures by which he may render a passion plausible and taking. Musset speaks straight from the heart.

Hugo, in dealing with sentiment, is not quite at his ease. He gropes vaguely without reaching the centre of his subject. He makes a succession of approaches to it, but he remains in baffled remoteness on the outside. In his embarrassment he seeks refuge behind

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metaphors and similes, behind flowers and stars. The poems in which he deals with pure sentiment have a dissatisfying slightness. He awakens a desire that he cannot gratify. We feel that the matter has been pressed too lightly and has yielded up too little of its essence. Take as an example the poem on the death of his brother, *A Eugène, Vicomte H.* How readily Hugo wanders from his subject to talk about himself and the unjust criticism from which he is suffering, to indulge in trivial reminiscences of his childish pranks, and in the inevitable picturesque landscape-painting, until his brother sinks almost into the position of an incidental ornament in the elegy he has nominally inspired, an elegy in which the reader ends by suspecting that the only sincere emotions chronicled are the poet's admiration for his own plays and his hatred of his critics.

Hugo constantly replaces a sentiment by a mere sentimental phrase; he makes great consumption of that whole vocabulary of words which through the ages have become gradually saturated with emotional suggestiveness. He hopes always that, in contact with the warm sympathy of his readers, some of this latent emotionality will evaporate into the atmosphere and involve them in a fine haze of sentimental illusion. Let the haze lift, and the reader finds that he has mistaken shadows for substance.

As another example of Hugo's inability to treat his subject with proper seriousness and sympathy and of his consequent floundering in an inextricable morass of metaphoric conceits, take his famous poem on the death of Charles X, *Sunt Lacrymae Rerum*.<sup>1</sup> After a short and coldly manneristic preamble, in which he compares the Parisian press to an "ill-tempered she-wolf rending the last rag of the royal purple," he curses—in forty-three alexandrines—the cannons of the Invalides for their silence on the occasion of the king's death.

Toujours agenouillés devant ce qui passe.

Then he suddenly retracts his maledictions and exonerates the cannon—it is man who is at fault. But, at any rate, he, the poet, once the guest of the king, he, who, unfolding his wing touches from below the eternal lyre, he will not refuse

Un lambeau de velours pour couvrir ce cercueil.

<sup>1</sup> M. Renouvier finds this poem very beautiful throughout and perhaps the most touching one that Hugo has written. Is this a case for quoting *Quot homines, tot sententiæ*, or *Ne sutor*, etc.?

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Then follow a few pages somewhat more appropriate, though purely rhetorical in spirit, after which the poet exhorts the people to clemency:

Jamais l'odeur des morts n'attire les lions,

a verse more flattering to the people than to the corpse.

Et moi, je ne crois pas  
Qu'il soit digne du peuple en qui Dieu se reflète  
De joindre au bras qui tue une main qui soufflette.

Hereupon, after an exhortation to the poets to hurry up the millenium, he asks grievingly why

La proscription  
Ne brise pas ses dents au marbre de la tombe?  
N'est-ce donc pas assez que, cygne, aigle ou colombe,  
Dès qu'un vent de malheur lui jette un nid de rois,  
Sortant de ce bois noir qu'on appelle les lois,  
Cette hyène, acharnée aux grandes races mortes,  
Vienne là, sous nos murs, les ronger à nos portes!

As regards the king, the poem could not well be more frigid—there is not in this lengthiest of elegies a single line that could rejoice the poor ghost vanishing into night, not a word of cordial praise, or of personal attachment. Hugo, in his royalist fidelity, seems only to be performing, rather poorly, a painful duty.

Take such a poem as *Bièvre* (Feuilles d'Automne, XXXIV): it is made up of a succession of pretty landscapes, culminating in an expression of the mood they inspire:

On sent venir des pleurs au bord de sa paupière;  
On lève au ciel les mains en s'écriant: Seigneur!

In that one pregnant word—and the procedure is a habitual one with Hugo—we are left to read the emotion, which the poet is apparently impotent to express—or to feel.

Often even this solitary and symbolic word is not vouchsafed us, and the hypothetically possible sentiment must be divined entire under the veil of imagery. Take the poem preceding *Bièvre*, a poem addressed to a friend who had joined the Trappist order. Was it worth while to take up so grave a subject only to compare this friend to a sailor who throws all his ballast overboard excepting sail and compass—the soul and God? Such matter, translated into mere images, suffers a cooling process to which no ingenuity of poetic



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craftsmanship can reconcile us. Or take another much admired poem, one which is indeed, thanks to Hugo's mastery of style chiefly, not without considerable poetic charm: *Puisqu'ici-bas toute âme*. Why does the poem remain only a pretty piece of art, a bit of glorified Dresden-china sentimentalism? Why does its verse, so flawlessly perfect as a piece of melodious prosodic virtuosity, leave one after all vaguely disappointed? It is because the poem promises more than it performs, aims at more than it can compass. The lovely, rippling verse seems always at the point of rising into a crested wave of passion, yet it never really gathers and swells. Its melody is never deepened by the breaking through of the "lyric cry" which the poet meant should pervade it. He has accumulated all the ingredients of passion, but he can not find the magical formula for making them leap together into an organic compound. He enumerates *seriatim* and with unimpassioned orderliness his sad thoughts, his tears, his vows of love, his transports, his caresses, but he gets no further. The hovering passion that should embrace in its larger unity all these disintegrated elements of sensuous beauty is absent; the poet impresses us as having only gathered together the fragmentary accessories of a pretty passion, like flowers in a basket, to lay at his lady's feet. The result is indeed the very acme of poetic prettiness—so much so that many a reader fails to note that it is after all hopelessly insignificant. It is true the ability to distinguish pretty poetry from beautiful poetry is not common among confirmed readers of Hugo.

Let us take still another poem, the much extolled one: *O mes lettres d'amour, de vertu, de jeunesse!* What a disparate mixture of tones, what an incredible confusion of colors, what an inky background of despairing disillusion! Yet the uncritical reader is naïve enough to be wrought upon by this dolorous lamentation falling from the lips of a young poet of twenty-eight summers, "l'heureux et le sage," still flushed with the phenomenal success of "Hernani" and sitting beside his lovely young wife (whom we may presume that he still loves a little) and the cradles of his children (whom we know he loved very much), and who, since youth is fled, Byronically begs the wind that carries it away to carry with it himself also. Byron had done so, Chateaubriand had done so, Lamartine had done so, and therefore Hugo must needs in his turn invoke the winds to do as much for himself. It was the heyday of romanticism, and a poet had to be able to love, to grieve, and to despair, quite as much as he had to be able to rhyme. Any temperamental cheerfulness and any un-

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romantic prosperity standing in the way could be ignored by a resolute artist uncompromisingly bent on being gloomy as night and Byron. It was an artistic duty. And, even at the worst, if there was absolutely nothing else to lament, the unfortunate poet unprovided with any other grief could, even at the age of twenty-eight, manage, his genius aiding him, to lament the departure of youth:

Jeunesse aux jours dorés, je t'ai donc dépensée!  
Oh! qu'il m'en reste peu! Je vois le fond du sort,  
Comme un prodigue en pleurs le fond du coffre-fort!

After all, few things are more terribly pathetic than the young romanticist's doleful wail at the blunting of his first voracious appetite for life and love.

Poems of this kind, and they are numerous in Hugo's work, show that, if he is infelicitous in his more direct transcriptions of what he has himself felt, he is more inadequate still when he tries to transport himself imaginatively into a mood that is not for the time being his own. Having in his robustly masculine and egotistic nature no native inclination toward that fecund brooding over the experiences of the emotional life, which alone makes it possible to discern the more poetical and fugitive of its aspects, he missed at the same time that deeper initiation into its fundamental constitution, which is the very basis of the poet's imaginative reconstruction of human feelings and passions. In his representation of them Hugo is able to reproduce only their most obvious and general outlines, with no hint of the subtler shadings imprinted by individual temperament. Delicate perceptiveness is what he most signally lacks. Take such a line as this:

La vague inquiétude  
Qui fait que l'homme craint son désir accompli.

It is Hugo's—yet who does not feel that it is a rare and felicitous accident utterly foreign to his habitual manner? His touch is generally forcible even to the point of rudeness. He remains always a bourgeois artist depicting the commonplaces of sentiment with much violence, exaggeration, and incidental splendor.

Having only these rather loose and generalized conceptions to work upon, Hugo's touch is primarily too light and pierces too little below the surface. But the moment he applies himself and strives to remedy this defect, which he vaguely feels, his touch at once becomes too heavy. His treatment of a sentimental theme thus tends to resolve

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itself into a contrast of lights and shades, of juxtaposed sunshine and gloom, into a bewildering succession of antitheses. Our attention is diverted from the emotion to the contrast offered by the two opposed halves of it which the poet has so ingeniously disunited, and as a result the effect achieved is one of surprise rather than of emotion. And the surprise is not always agreeable; the final impression left by the contrast is not always one even of mixed charm. Hugo can not set off what is beautiful or exquisite without the foil of what is ugly or repellent. Beside the palace he conjures up the hovel; beside the whitest virtue he must needs collocate the blackest vice. He seems to find more pleasure in the contrast than in either of the things contrasted. In a stanza describing the ardor of his youthful love, after such a charming line as

O temps de rêverie, et de force, et de grâce!

he sinks to the trivial couplet:

Attendre tous les soirs une robe qui passe,  
Baiser un gant jeté!

Here assuredly the touch is too light. In the next stanza, he continues

Qu'importe  
Si moins d'illusions viennent ouvrir ma porte  
Qui gémit en tournant!

Here undeniably the touch is too heavy. It is to this latter extreme that Hugo most frequently runs. His habitual conception of a Romeo is that of "the lover sighing like a furnace." It is sufficiently conveyed in the line:

Rêver le jour, brûler et se tordre la nuit.

Or as he even more eloquently puts it elsewhere: "If you have never called out a hundred times from dusk till dawn the loved one's name, and cursed your mother, and longed for death, and felt that for this child who laughs at your tears you would find it sweet indeed to expire upon the rack, if you have not done all this (and Hugo enumerates many other uncomfortable things) then you have never loved and never suffered." Poor Byron! had he dreamed of all the romantic insanities that were destined to be perpetrated in his name, he would no doubt have chastened and subdued his rhetoric.

The bane of such poetry, even when sincere, is that it is too far

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removed from the ordinary types of human feeling. It is too consciously eloquent of the contrast which the artist conventionally imagines as existing between his own wild nature and the supposed tameness of the bourgeois. It departs so widely from every acknowledged standard of rationality that it invites contempt from the sane-minded, while it contributes to maintain in the mind of the more ingenuous the false notion that genius is a brilliant and highly irresponsible form of madness—the poet, though endowed with some stray attributes of godlike wit, being singularly incapable of wise living and of foresight, and on the whole sublimely akin to the brute creation rather than to his human fellows.

In sentiment thus consistently carried to the last extreme of exaggeration, without any hint of a recoil toward balanced judgment, it is almost inevitable that the poet should be prone not only to heaviness of touch, but, to what is almost inseparable from it, to actual falsity of touch.

The false note—that is indeed the most pervading and the most crying fault of Hugo's poetry. It would be easy to fill a whole volume with the most unmistakable examples of the absurdly and egregiously false note—in relatively less offensive form, Hugo may almost be said to have himself filled all his volumes with examples of it, false from insincerity, from exaggeration, from preciosity, from inadequacy. A systematic distortion, that undermines and invalidates all the human values of his poetry, unfortunately runs through and colors it from beginning to end. Speaking of the dead who have vanished from the familiar scenes once endeared by their presence, he turns with romantic reproachfulness to the roses:

Vous ne voyez donc pas ces deux êtres, ô roses,  
Que vous refleurissez?

Here, perhaps, a discreeter poet would have stopped, for the grief we feel at nature's unparticipating coldness is almost automatically dissolved by the instinctive sense that we are personifying what is in its very essence inhuman. Hugo continues with a hardening and querulous touch that waxes gratuitously fanciful:

Avez-vous bien le cœur, ô roses! de renaître  
Dans le même bosquet, sous la même fenêtre?

And finally, with a touch little less than leaden:

Ingrates! vous n'avez ni regrets, ni mémoire.  
Vous vous réjouissez dans toute votre gloire;  
Vous n'avez point pâli.



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Ah! je ne suis qu'un homme et qu'un roseau qui ploie,  
Mais je ne voudrais pas, quant à moi, d'une joie  
Faite de tant d'oubli!

In this fashion, the moment Hugo's verse touches upon subjects of genuine human concern, we usually find ourselves in the presence of a poet who, while pretending and, no doubt, even intending to deal with them in grandly serious fashion, is fatally led to empty them of most of their serious content and to use them as playthings for his imagination. His fancy toys with these profounder things with the cool detachment and irresponsibility of a child to whom love and grief remain as yet a sealed book. Too often, as Heine complained, instead of poetry with a central core of fire, we get in Hugo's metaphorical versions of passion only conceits expressed in heated words.

Dans le fond de ton cœur, comme un fruit pour l'été.  
Mets à part ton trésor de larmes.

Hélas! vous avez donc laissé la cage ouverte,  
Que votre oiseau s'est envolé!

Hugo, in expressing emotion, sacrifices the truth of nature to dramatic effect. The silly touch in his picture of the good bishop, who sprained his ankle to avoid crushing an ant, is eminently typical. Feeling is with Hugo always melodramatic, pain is always agony or martyrdom, grief is always frantic. Emotion is expressed by its physical symbols: the flesh quivers, the bleeding heart is thrust before our eyes. It is often the lowest type of emotional art: it is satisfied if it can shake our nerves. The dark pigments are lavishly laid on. Take as an example the absurd exaggerations of the *Maître d'Etudes*. He is a *sublime forçat*, and school is the *bagne d'innocence*. He is depicted as a slave in chains,

Ayant l'ennui sans fin devant ses yeux funèbres, . . .  
Voyez, la morne angoisse a fait blêmir ses tempes:  
Songez qu'il saigne, hélas! sous ses pauvres habits.

The whole poem is in this key—and so common is this defect, that the poems immediately preceding it ("Contemplations," V)—or those immediately following it—might likewise have been cited as illustrations. There is, to quote another example, something repugnant to the most fundamental ideas of art, something akin to the truculent gambols of parody and caricature, in such lines as these on a woman who died of hunger:

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Cette femme étant seule au fond de sa chaumière,  
La faim, goule effarée aux hurlements plaintifs,  
Maigre et féroce, était entrée à pas furtifs,  
Sans bruit, et l'avait prise à la gorge et tuée.

That is playing with the subject, though it is rather grim sport. The poet has deserted the emotion to dally with its accessories. And he has made it rather difficult, not to say impossible, to take this untimely play of imagination with poetic seriousness. And yet—the willing reader is capable of following a favorite poet a long way. Did not some one translate in all seriousness Heine's wanton page in which the ardent lover prayed for a pen big enough to write across the whole star-spangled firmament in words of flame the burning sentiment *Agnes, ich liebe dich!*

It must be acknowledged that in thus imaginatively playing with sentiment, Hugo's instinct is nevertheless guiding him right, for he is now and then exceedingly felicitous when he half forgets his emotion in dallying with its accidents. He succeeds best in depicting it, rather than rendering it, by means of external attitude and action. His imagination does not allow him to enter into its essence, but his picturesque vision enables him to portray it in very striking *tableaux vivants*. Incapable of painting with precision a profound feeling, he can often suggest it with vivid power by fixing the scenic aspects in which the observer may surprise those who suffer or rejoice. It is in this manner that he has treated in *La Conscience* the supposed awakening of conscience, rendering very powerfully, at any rate, the vague terror of the supernatural; the remorse of Canute is similarly treated in *Le Parricide*, and so is the silent grief of Adam and Eve in *Les Malheureux*, in a far finer page than either of the preceding ones. It is in this same manner that Jean Valjean's mental agonies are depicted in the most powerful chapter of "*Les Misérables*," *Une Tempête sous un Crâne*, where the emotion is so intensely visualized that the effect is overwhelming, although, at the same time, there is such lack of psychologic precision that, but for a casual phrase here and there in these many pages, the whole description might apply equally well to a criminal meditating an assassination or to a saint contemplating martyrdom. The manner is powerful, but it is primitive.

It is also necessarily somewhat superficial. Rich in dramatic effects, it is correspondingly inadequate in dealing with the essential themes of lyric poetry. The most characteristically French poetry does

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not, it must be acknowledged, shine very brightly here. Hugo had no supreme models to guide him, no really satisfactory models even, as to taste, tone, and poetic propriety. French taste is well nigh perfect when moving on every-day levels, but when it rises above these and finds itself face to face with the unusual, it exhibits rather startling aberrations. One has only to visit a French theatre, or a French cemetery, to realize that he is among a people who are quite unlikely to utter the last word of the poetry of love or of death. Hugo is no exception.

In *Amour*, Hugo discourses of love:

Amour! "Loi," dit Jésus. "Mystère," dit Platon.

Under such high chaperonage, we may safely go on.

Est-on maître d'aimer? Pourquoi deux êtres s'aiment?  
Demande à l'eau qui court, demande à l'air qui fuit,  
Au moucheron qui vole à la flamme la nuit,  
Au rayon d'or qui veut baiser la grappe mûre!

This is a considerable descent—the gnat and the sunbeam are hardly the most explicit of moral counsellors. Love is for Hugo one of nature's most imperious ordainings: it would be quite useless to resist. Hugo, in thus sheltering love under the protecting ægis of Necessity, is too unphilosophic to ask himself whether it enjoys in this a privileged isolation or whether the same delightful irresponsibility does not attach to all our natural instincts.

A poet's conception of love is of course closely connected with his conception of woman. The one can hardly rise higher than the other. The attempt to combine the chivalrous idealism of the North with the traditional Gallic cult of passion is a manifestation of superficial romanticism. The varnish remains of a transparent thinness, and the reality which it glosses over is only too certain here and there to crack through and peep out—and not so very shamefacedly either. Though Hugo has much to say about the divineness of woman, his accent is never more thoroughly terrestrial than when he touches this dubious chord. Though he calls her an angel, he makes it abundantly evident that he thinks of her chiefly as a houri. His attitude is decidedly Oriental. Woman is subordinated to man in a way that is startlingly unmodern:

Je me fais bien petite, en mon coin près de vous;  
Vous êtes mon lion, je suis votre colombe;

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J'entends de vos papiers le bruit paisible et doux;  
Je ramasse parfois votre plume qui tombe.

Did ever un-Arabian poet picture his lady-love speaking to him with quite such sugary submissiveness? One need hardly be surprised, after that, to learn that Juliette not only picked up the poet's pen but copied out with it nearly the whole manuscript of "Les Misérables."

Elle disait: Voyez  
Ma prière toujours dans vos cieux comme un astre,  
Et mon amour toujours comme un chien à tes pieds.

It is hardly surprising that Hugo should say of his heroine Cosette: "There are generous natures that readily surrender themselves. Cosette was one. One of the magnanimities of woman is to yield." Cosette, it should be noted, is Hugo's ideal: a grisette in the second edition.<sup>1</sup>

Upon such a conception of woman it is evident that Hugo will be quite unable to graft even the usual romantic chimæra of love as a hyphen between man and God, an embodiment of what is usually dubbed "the ideal." Love does not, as in the warmer heart of Lamartine, rise from the sensuous to the supersensuous levels of his nature to wreath with nebulous splendors the face of Deity smiling approval from on high. It feels no need of mystifying itself religiously. It is content to move on the purely material level, and, except when it waxes rhetorical, it has only the time-honored attributes that have been made so familiar to us all by romantic drama, autograph-albums, valentines, best-sellers, and by the incurable platitude to which unredeemed human nature is unhappily subject:

L'hymen de deux pensées,  
Les soupirs étouffés, les mains longtemps pressées,  
Le baiser, parfum pur, enivrante liqueur,  
Et tout ce qu'un regard dans un regard peut lire.

A poet who sings of love in this strain, and for whom it is in reality only a manifestation of pure naturalism, is destined to prove

<sup>1</sup> The page quoted was evidently written to please Juliette. It need not surprise the reader, who is told in his manuals of literature that Cosette is Madame Hugo, to learn that she is in reality a composite picture of Adèle and Juliette! Note the year of the Idyl of the *rue Plumet*, in "Les Misérables," 1832, and especially the date of the wedding, Feb. 17, 1833, and compare Hugo's letter to Juliette, Feb. 17, 1833 (cited in L. Séché: *Saint-Beuve, appendix*). Yet, in spite of all this, Hugo adds that in 1833 "l'on avait l'impudeur de se marier chez soi."



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very unsatisfying when he attempts to rise above this level. In another poem Hugo celebrates the charms of virginal innocence:

Jeune fille, la grâce emplit tes dix-septs ans.  
Ton regard dit: Matin, et ton front dit: Printemps.  
Il semble que ta main porte un lis invisible.  
Don Juan te voit passer et murmure: "Impossible!"

The discouraged reader of such poetry is likely to dismiss it in echoing Don Juan's verdict. One would vainly try to imagine such an impropriety slipping from the pen of Wordsworth or Tennyson; hardly even from that of Lord Byron or Tom Moore, for Byron and Moore were, on the whole, men of taste. The poet continues very prettily:

Lesbos [why Lesbos?]  
Et les marins d'Hydra, s'ils te voyaient sans voiles,  
Te prendraient pour l'Aurore aux cheveux pleins d'étoiles;

and he ends

Un ange vient baiser ton pied quand il est nu,  
Et c'est ce qui te fait ton sourire ingénu.

Compare this shallow and sensuous sentimentalism, worthy of the age of Greuze, with any kindred utterances of our chaste English poets, and we have at once a touchstone that reveals their fundamentally different attitude toward womanhood and that brings out in clear contrast the dominantly sensual element in the French poet's mood. Such comparison does him no injustice, for this mood is a constant one in his sentimental poetry. Even when it is quite foreign to his theme, he gratuitously thrusts it upon us.<sup>1</sup> In describing the intensity of the love-light in his lady's eyes, he enumerates all the lesser delights that he would be content to forego for its sake—and he inaugurates the series with the astonishing couplet:

Contempler dans son bain sans voiles  
Une fille aux yeux innocents.

The amorous licences which in Hugo's later poetry amused the frivolous and scandalized the discreet, need have surprised no one,

<sup>1</sup>This disagreeably sensuous note runs all through the love idyl of "Les Misérables." It seems written by one who has played the spy upon the privacy of two lovers; it is indecently reportorial, with occasional flights of the journalistic soul into the azure.

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for the underlying ideas had already appeared in advance instalments in his earlier work, and had been interspersed with special frequency through the "Contemplations" to relieve their general austerity. An example of this less austere mood is *A propos d'Horace*, a lengthy invective against school-masters and their ways. They can teach nothing, because they have learned nothing,—and, it would further seem, they have never learned because they have never loved (Hugo speaks of clericals),

Grimauds hideux qui n'ont, tant leur tête est vidée,  
Jamais eu de maîtresse et jamais eu d'idée,

and who consequently

Ne tolèrent pas le jour entrant dans l'âme  
Sous la forme pensée ou sous la forme femme.

Hugo, young or old, seems to have preferred to have the light come to him in the latter form, for we learn in this poem that, despite his tender years, he had

Un rendez-vous avec la fille du portier;

but alas! the unfeeling schoolmaster had kept him in school copying verses from Horace—that *bon garçon* who used to drink Sabine wine, court his slaves, and do many other things besides, to learn which the curious must turn to Hugo's ultra-Gallic verse. On such a subject the contemplative poet can write three hundred alexandrines, renewing with unabated vigor, when nearly sixty, the curses of sixteen.

Hugo, it is true, may to some extent plead the constraint of circumstance. The poet who marries one woman and loves another suffers grievous disadvantages when he attempts to Platonize. He has lived and loved under the auspices of the terrestrial Venus, and she is apt to look askance at the votary who would supplement his voyage to Cythera by a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He is almost necessarily condemned to sing of love as a passion in its most material and at bottom its least poetic aspect. His poetry is doomed to forego the touch of the ideal—or else to drag it in by a sort of profanation. It is this profane mingling of high and low, this squinting ambiguity of purpose, that spoils the long series of Hugo's love-poems, chiefly sung in honor of Juliette, though judiciously interspersed, for the sake of variety, with a few in honor of Adele—and of Jeanneton, and Lise, and Rose, and the others. The best of them, even when

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clothed with something of the beauty that passion and fancy can give, still retain an unpleasant suggestiveness—as the French would say, *un relent d'alcôve*.

The terrestrial and the celestial Venuses, sacred and profane love, the real and the ideal, clasp hands and whirl around in a vertiginous bacchanal. The bewildered reader is at a loss to know whether this love is physical, or metaphysical, or both at once; and he may well view with some misgivings the rather frequent invocation of Jehovah and of the infinite in connection with a Parisian actress, whose faith in God was mainly condensed in the pleasing hope that he would indulgently wink whenever she tossed her bonnet (a little the worse for wear) over the top of the mill. It is thanks to her rather questionable inspiration that Hugo arrives at the not exactly austere doctrine that

Les femmes sont sur la terre  
Pour tout idéaliser;  
L'univers est un mystère  
Que commente leur baiser.

Unfortunately, the gospel, translated into Gallic to such ballet-dancing tunes, seems a little unacceptable; and unacceptable too seems the poet who on one page sings of chaos and cosmos, and on the next of kisses and caresses, on one page of the mystery of life and death, and on the next of what is most sensual and earthly in love, on one page of universal peace on earth and goodwill to man, and on the next of Austerlitz and Moscow, on one page of his imperturbable serenity and his love of humanity, and, on the next of archbishop Ségur whom he calls an ass, and of Pius IX whom he calls an assassin, while we have only to turn to the next following page to enjoy *presto* a fleeting vision of the poet prayerfully rising heavenward on soaring wing above this weltering chaos of contradictions, serenely convinced that he has found in Juliette's kisses a commentary on the mystery of the universe in which Christ and Plato stand sponsors for the kind of love that dispenses with and (on occasion) even defies marriage certificates. Variety is indeed one of the great merits of Hugo's work—but can the same poet be at the same time a Lucretius and a Béranger, a Juvenal and a Petronius, an Æschylus and an Anacreon, even though he possess such unexampled largeness of stride as to be able to pass in a single step from Jesus to Juliette, and from Goton to God? For unhappily,

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Juliette and Jesus, Plato and Turlurette, are madly and inextricably conjoined. We must needs take them all or none.

Car on ne peut, à l'heure où les sens sont en feu,  
Êtreindre la beauté sans croire embrasser Dieu.

Hugo's Platonism and his Jeannetonism do not belong to different periods or even to different moods. We can not dismiss the lower strain as the wild and whirling words of a Byronic youth and cling to the higher one as the *novissima verba* of a poet chastened by age and experience, and lifted up by reverent insight to something of prophetic strain—or who, as he put it, was chronically “busy seeing God.” Hugo, it is plain, always saw God with one eye and Goton with the other, and only too frequently he has so perfectly fused the twin elements of his vision that he has sung God Byronically and Goton religiously. One regrets that he did not take more to heart his own wise dictum:

Dieu mit, sachant ce qui convient à l'homme,  
Le ciel bien loin et la femme tout près.

Hugo's friend, the sculptor David d'Angers, said, in 1837, that he was hurrying with all possible speed the execution of the poet's bust, “because the sensual part of his face was making such a vigorous fight against the intellectual part.” In his love-poetry, it had an easy and an early victory. When, by occasional happy accident, Hugo succeeds in forgetting God and becomes sincere, his love-poetry becomes a far more genuine expression of himself. Sometimes we find in it the graceful caprices of a troubadour loitering by flowery hedges or in leafy forest-closes, while he lets his imagination, stirred by half-remembered and half-fancied lady-loves, dally pleasantly with soft sentimental conceits. At other times we encounter a frankly sensual strain, a little acridly sensual for the most part, but one in which the feeling, such as it is, is genuine enough—the native wood-notes wild of the faun who pursues some nymph, not too fleet-footed, with a pursuit so sure of final success that it admits of leisurely interspersions with many a song whose melody and art very prettily dissimulate its somewhat unlovely primitivism.

Hugo's native cheerfulness of spirit, which neither the petty vexations nor the deeper sorrows of life could long subdue, his hearty enjoyment of existence on the purely animal plane, an enjoyment which seems never to have known the chilling influence of age or



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of satiety, his intense delight in the material world, and in its thousand-fold reverberation in an exhaustless fancy whose prodigal richness was never checked by analysis or introspection, his unspiritual paganism, in short, made it possible for him, throughout the earlier and middle periods of his long career, to continue with unabating zest to throw about the most tenuous bits of sentimentalism, or the merest throb of sensuous emotion, a golden veil of poetry. Although in far too many of his poems the nebulous marginalia of the prophet have been incongruously incorporated into the text of the poet, the minority that have escaped such interpolation form a large bulk of that portion of his work which graces the anthologies and by which he will, no doubt, ultimately be known far more than by his inadequate epic or dramatic efforts.

However, the fleeting years always steal something even from those who resist them best and longest. The youthful faun in process of the seasons became a sexagenarian satyr, and poured forth a whole volume of senile songs, "*Les Chansons des Rues et des Bois*." God and Plato, Dante and Virgil, and all the old indecencies of earlier days reappear, more exasperating than ever. Corneille in some of his earliest verses said, in Sophoclean vein:

L'on commence d'être heureux  
Quand l'on cesse d'être amoureux,  
Lorsque notre âme s'est purgée  
De cette sottise enragée.

But Corneille young was wiser than Hugo old. The burden of Hugo's song to the end is that women may come and women may go, but love goes on forever.

Je lisais Platon.—J'ouvris  
La porte de ma retraite,  
Et j'aperçus Lycoris,  
C'est-à-dire Turlurette.

These dubious apparitions show in bolder outline through the poetic fripperies, now somewhat flimsy, and cut by a hand that has renounced even the reminiscence of what Paris calls prudery and the rest of the world modesty. Hugo gives us in the *Chansons* a whole volume of idyls, idyls no matter where, idyls with no matter whom.

Un éden peut être un taudis;  
Le craquement du lit de sangle  
Est un des bruits du paradis.

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From the olive-grove of Plato to the squalid quarters haunted by Turlurette is a long way, longer perhaps than most readers will choose to follow, even though the poet assure them that

Le hautbois  
Donnait à Platon des idées  
Voluptueuses, dans les bois.

The same unkind allegation is also made at the expense of Æschylus. This, it would seem, is what the study of the ancients leads to! It may be added that all this appears to be subtly related—by threads which I confess escape me—not only to antique wisdom (although *invita Minerva*) but also to Christianity (though not of the Pauline variety)

Du nez de Minerve indignée  
Au crâne chauve de Saint Paul  
Suspend la toile d'araignée  
Qui prendra les rimes au vol.

Of this incredible performance, so distressing even to his most devoted followers, Hugo was not a little proud; he was very much surprised at the protests of contemporary critics. "It is the book into which I have put myself most completely," he ingenuously remarked.

I have dwelt at some length on this unsavory topic, partly because it is inevitable in a study of Hugo, and partly from the indignation which every honest soul must needs feel whenever the name of Plato is thus taken in vain by a romanticist.

Si nous n'avions fait retrousser Goton,  
Ce Jocrisse risquait de devenir Platon.

The reader who realizes that the dream of love is in old age intertwined with the thought of death, will perhaps feel that the sexagenarian poet, his head turned by the kisses of these easy-mannered shepherdesses, is too oblivious of what he had once written in austerer mood:

La fosse obscure attend l'homme, lèvres ouvertes,  
La mort est le baiser de la bouche tombeau.

Yet the poet himself would not have us believe that this obliviousness is habitual:

Je ne cacherai pas au peuple qui m'écoute  
Que je songe souvent à ce que font les morts.

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Has the poetry of death proved richer in Hugo's hands than the poetry of love? Or have his impotence in reflection and his sentimental limitations rendered his prodigally fanciful poetry as inadequate in elegiac as in amatory sentiment? To begin with, one whole aspect of the subject, and that the most significant, lies beyond his range: he is incapable of seizing the deeper pathos, the profounder meaning of death. He says little that is ideally moving, nothing that is ideally enlightening. His pathos has the taint of the commonplace. His sensibility, here too, is that of a bourgeois, not that of a poet. He sees only the physical side of death, he feels only the dramatic side of its tragedy. To the primitivism which reduces love to an affair of the senses, death is bound to be an affair of the senses also. As Brunetière has remarked, it is Hugo's love of life, and of what is most materialistic in life, that makes him so eloquent on the terror and on the horror of death. These narrow bounds Hugo feels, and he renders his feeling with considerable power. Death seems to him the most cruel of facts; it ruthlessly breaks off forever the deep-rooted bonds of cherished habit. Hugo has a complacently optimistic faith in immortality—except when in the presence of death. Here it quite fails him. He feels only terror and repulsion. Beyond these he can not really go. That is why he can not resign himself. Death finds him rebellious, and grief incenses him even against God. Moreover, the reflections which death inspires, when he really views it face to face, are preeminently such as would be comprehended and appreciated with perfect readiness in any *arrière-boutique*. Philosophically he can not get beyond the eloquent contrasts of life and death and the plaintive but superficial pathos which they comport.

Mourir! demandons-nous, à toute heure, en nous-même:  
—Comment passerons-nous le passage suprême?—  
Finir avec grandeur est un illustre effort.

(a verse having the declamatory ring of Corneille)

Le moment est lugubre et l'âme est accablée;  
Quel pas que la sortie!—Oh! l'affreuse vallée  
Que l'embuscade de la mort!

Feeling this one aspect of death so overpoweringly and grasping its other sides only through the medium of this passionate blindness, it was inevitable that Hugo should more than ever oscillate here between the excessively heavy and the excessively light touch. Speaking of the death of his parents, he tells us that he has, like a miser, buried his

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treasure, and that, when he saw their coffin closed, he beheld two white doves soar away from it toward Heaven. What frigid conceits! Is it the chill of death—or that of rhetoric—that pervades this couplet:

Et que je te sens froide en te touchant, ô mort!  
Noir verrou de la porte humaine!

Literature is full of verse and prose perpetrated by rhetoricians laboriously toying with the theme of death. It is a commonplace which amateur and professional alike have always felt free to desecrate. For the death of the old and the young, of the great and the humble, the *littérateurs* have always poured forth reams of *Consolations*—but for the infliction of these humanity has as yet found no consolation whatever. Peiresc's death was lamented, we are told, in forty languages—perhaps the most lamentable feature connected with that lamentable event. Hugo has done his share in adding to the chill of death by making frequent speeches at the graves of contemporaries—funeral orations full of such glib and pompous phrases as should, in a really reverent soul threatened with such a send-off, inspire a prayerful wish to outlive the prospective funeral elocutionist. Who that could elude it, would choose to be buried to this tune?

"The tomb is neither tenebrous nor empty. It is here that we find the grand illumination. Allow the man who speaks at this moment to turn toward that brightness. He who no longer exists, so to speak, here below, he whose ambitions are all immersed in death, has the right to salute in the depth of the infinite, in the sinister and sublimely dazzling light of the sepulchre, that immense star, God." What vain pomp and pretentiousness of phrase in the presence of God and of death! The following lines, spoken at George Sand's funeral, have a nimbler gait:

"The human form is an occultation. It masks the truly divine face which is the idea. George Sand was an idea. She is delivered from the flesh, she is free. She is dead, therefore she is alive. *Patuit dea*." M. Renouvier, from whom I quote these examples, comments thus: "This brilliant *équivoque* has displeased some." The fact that he does not himself seem to be of the number reconciles me a little to finding myself usually in such fundamental disagreement with him as to the merits of Victor Hugo.

Elegiac sentiment, when expressed chiefly through imagery, runs this risk of falling into frigid fancifulness, or, when it leans to the other side, that of falling into an affected simplicity. Hugo readily



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falls into either extreme. His all-devouring imagination is always at hand to appropriate to itself what belongs to the heart alone, and it converts into cold conceits what for others are the ultimate and tragic facts of an awful reality. "As for me," says Jules Lemaitre irreverently, "I do not know of anything more amusing than Hugo's meditations on death." Even the *Pauca Meae*, the book of elegies on his daughter's death, offer not infrequent lapses of this sort—the most incomprehensible being that in the punning title *Veni, vidi, vixi*.<sup>1</sup>

The poem on the death of Juliette's daughter, "Claire P.", offers, perhaps, the most characteristic examples of Hugo's tendency to take refuge in figures. On what a banal level the opening lines! How perilously close to puerility the couplet

Et moi, je l'avais vue encor toute petite.  
Elle me disait Vous, et je lui disais Tu.

What frosty falsity in the couplet

Elle était fiancée à l'hymen inconnu.  
A qui mariez-vous, mon Dieu, toutes ces vierges?

Even more coldly dissonant is the line where the dead girl is compared to

La Flamande qui rit à travers les houblons,

while we fairly reach the level of Dryden's too famous elegy on Lord Hastings in the Marinesque conceit:

Elle sourit, et dit aux anges sous leurs voiles:  
Est-ce qu'il est permis de cueillir des étoiles?

<sup>1</sup>A yet more serious lapse has been commented on by Hugo's critics. Just as in the life of Hugo the period consecrated by his grief for Leopoldine is desecrated by the scandalous Biard incident, so the elegies on his daughter's death are, in one and the same volume, incongruously flanked by poems to Mme. Biard's predecessors and successors in the chamber kept for transient lodgers in Hugo's heart alongside of the permanent one in which Juliette had succeeded Mme. Hugo. The critic, even though he have far more reverence in the presence of death than Hugo showed either in life or in literature, may very pardonably be reminded of those funeral processions of bygone days which on their way to the cemetery paused for refreshment at the tavern.

L'hymne des saturnales  
Sert de prélude au chant des morts.

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That is not merely puerility—I fear it must be called by an even harsher name: silliness. This word is certainly none too harsh to be applied to the lines that follow, in which the poet proposes that this beautiful girl be carved in marble as a Mary—or a Venus! Strange alternative! One remembers here that her mother is said to have posed for the statue of “Lille” on the Place de la Concorde, and was in any case a model. And this poem, so full of false and jarring notes, ends with a note of the most crying vulgarity, one in which reappears Hugo’s characteristic vision of death seen from the flatly unpoetic viewpoint of a bourgeois abandonment to despair:

Ta mère, assise sur ta fosse,  
Dit:—Le parfum des fleurs est faux, l’aurore est fausse,  
L’oiseau qui chante aux bois ment, et le cygne ment!  
L’étoile n’est pas vraie au fond du firmament,  
Le ciel n’est pas le ciel et là-haut rien ne brille,  
Puisque, lorsque je crie à ma fille: “Ma fille,  
Je suis là, lève-toi!” quelqu’un le lui défend;  
Et que je ne puis pas réveiller mon enfant.

There is poetry that every French maid-servant would weep over, and every cook would proclaim divine.

All these defects proceed from inadequate feeling, from feeling insufficiently refined. One step more—that of not really feeling at all—and the poet takes to playing with his subject, to embroidering it with often horrid and grotesque fantasticality.

The prevalence of this manneristic romanticism, of this ghastly graveyard style, in Hugo’s later work is only too apparent to every reader. No poet has dwelt with such unspiritual fascination on all the grisly horrors of death, on all the scare-crow hideousness and wriggling putrefaction of the tomb viewed from the inside, from the standpoint of the corpse,

Qui sent un doigt obscur, sous sa paupière close,  
Lui retirer son œil.

Gautier and even Baudelaire himself seem here only timid imitators. Hugo sees earthworms issue from the eyes of the dead; he hears weird dialogues between them and the coffin-boards; and even the commemorative rose that grows on the tomb becomes ghoulish and utters words that might seem extremely discouraging to a corpse that had not yet become case-hardened among its new surroundings:

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—Qui donc es-tu?—Je suis la rose.

—Et que veux-tu?—Boire ton sang.

Hugo always dwells on

La douleur,  
Le noir cercueil, le front qui se heurte aux murailles,  
Les lugubres sanglots qui sortent des entrailles.

These sensations he often renders with considerable power, because they can be powerfully evoked by intensely materialistic vision. But his expression is not truly poetic; it is too completely abandoned, too crudely realistic; it is too closely related to the wild outcries and the mad gesticulation of primitive emotion. Nearly ten years after Leopoldine's death he writes:

Oh! je fus comme un fou dans le premier moment,  
Hélas! et je pleurai trois jours amèrement.

The poems written on her death during this long period are all very much in this key: there is no softening gradation, no transmutation in his sorrow. The interest is that belonging to direct personal outpouring of grief, not to a sorrow glorified by translation into poetry. The poet moves us by showing us his bleeding wound, not by uttering the wisdom into which suffering has initiated him. It is biographic, not poetic, pathos. When this elementary emotion reaches its climax of intensity, as it does in the book of the "Contemplations" dedicated to the memory of Leopoldine, it inspires some of Hugo's most powerful verses, profoundly moving for their dolorous sincerity and the utter abandonment to despair which they so eloquently record. Some of these elegies have at the same time a chiselled perfection of form, a marmorean purity of outline, that represent the highest level of Hugo's achievement in style.

But the religious sentiment, which alone can make the interest of such verse something more and higher than the perfection of dramatic pathos, is on the whole absent. At most, it may be said to stand trembling on the threshold in vague and ambiguous outline. We have here neither the distinctive poetry of faith, nor the distinctive poetry of revolt. There is an indeterminate oscillation between despairing, half-defiant revolt and a rather feminine and Catholic submission, a blind submission without resignation, an impotent and frustrated attempt to take grief as a mystery to be accepted but not

to be understood. In truth, the poet sees only his own grief, and he sees only his own self through his grief. It is amazing how little these pages offer save eloquent variations on the one theme *I suffer*. It is the grief of a strong man in collapse, a self-centered grief that abandons itself in the darkness, with no inner resources of consolation, no instinctive groping toward the light. It dwells only on the pathetic details in which it had its origin, and it awaits only the apathetic calm and the spiritless resignation which the vulgar hand of time brings to all when sorrow recedes into the all-devouring past.

It is the grief of one to whom the religious sentiment is not a reality, and to whom its consolations are without meaning. Hugo has written reams of religious poetry, more of it certainly than any other modern poet. Its one omnipresent defect is that it is never religious. The reader who comes to it for brilliant exhibitions of Hugo's artistry will find them here as elsewhere; but he who comes to it for genuine and satisfying expression of the religious sentiment will be disappointed. If he is a candid soul, he may let some of his own feeling stray into the springes which the poet has left open to catch it, but he will find none there. The poem *A Louis B.* in the "Chants du Crépuscule," of which the church bell is the symbolic theme, is a marvelous amplification of sustained imagery, but I fear that it would affect a truly devout reader as only an exhibition of superb virtuosity. Must we not say as much of the poem following it, *Dans l'église de . . .* ? What richness of poetic raiment and of rhetoric hiding the poverty of the inspiration! The poet does not even recoil from obtruding on us in this pious setting four-score verses of voluptuous and bacchanalian song, peculiarly coarse and cynical. And when he finally returns to his subject, what consolation does he offer to the fair penitent kneeling in tears before the altar? He informs her that her soul is like a winged bird. In the poem *A la mère de l'enfant mort*, we have another illustration of how Hugo's imagination, so fertile in wayside decoration and illustration, fails in that higher creative insight which the imagination can only attain when allied with spiritual powers as active as itself. In verses that recall the Consolations in vogue in Renaissance days, Hugo hints to the bereaved mother that she has lost her child because she described heaven and its joys to him too much and too attractively, and had not enough dwelt on the need she had of him on earth. That is surely to talk of death with the apparatus of religion but not religiously. In another poem Hugo pictures his friends Sainte-Beuve and the



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painter Boulanger, "the artist and the apostle," visiting old churches and talking architecture *devant un vieux portail*, or watching for a pair of black eyes peeping over a fan from behind the blinds.

Oh! de la jeune fille et du vieux monastère,  
Toi, peins-nous la beauté, toi, dis-nous le mystère;  
Charmez-nous tour à tour.  
A travers le blanc voile et la muraille grise  
Votre œil, ô mes amis, sait voir Dieu dans l'église,  
Dans la femme l'amour!

Here we have religion tintured with love, just as a moment ago we had love flavored with religion. If either were genuine, there might be a resultant danger of mistaking it for the other. In expression Hugo certainly illustrates the confusion, and the Almighty is made to play the rôle of the terrestrial Venus, *in silvis quae corpora jungit amantum*. Hugo sings to his mistress

C'est Dieu qui mit l'amour au bout de toute chose,  
L'amour en qui tout vit, l'amour sur qui tout pose!  
C'est Dieu qui fait la nuit plus belle que le jour;  
C'est Dieu qui sur ton corps, ma jeune souveraine,  
A versé la beauté comme une coupe pleine,  
Et dans mon cœur l'amour!

And presently he says to the same lady:

A moi la couronne d'épines!  
A vous la couronne de fleurs!

This shocking use of the symbols of religion to celebrate the rites of his own profane amours, and the equally shocking use of God as an antithetical balance to his own or to Napoleon's greatness plainly suggest that God has for Hugo mainly metaphoric and rhetorical significance. Hugo describes Napoleon as one who daily

Proposait quelque grand caprice  
A Dieu qui n'y consentait pas

and as one who planned to build

Un tel empire sous son nom  
Que Jéhovah dans les nuées  
Fût jaloux de Napoléon.

Hugo's rhetoric can carry him even farther:

Un jour Dieu sur sa table  
Jouait avec le diable  
Du genre humain haï.

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Chacun tenait sa carte,  
L'un joua Bonaparte,  
Et l'autre Mastai.

God playing cards with the devil—it is not exactly religious emotion that is finding vent here—nor perhaps even in the passage of the *Prière pour tous* in which Hugo bids his infant daughter pray

Pour celui que le plaisir souille  
D'embrassements jusqu'au matin,

and also

Pour les femmes échevelées  
Qui vendent le doux nom d'amour.

Religious emotion would be less paganly descriptive. And it would never indulge at all in conceptions like this:

L'outrage injuste et vil là-haut se change en gloire.  
Quand Jésus commençait sa longue passion,  
Le crachat qu'un bourreau lança sur son front blême  
Fit au ciel à l'instant même  
Une constellation.

Such aberrations represent something more than an error of taste. It is something more fundamental even than taste which should preserve a poet, even an anti-clerical poet, in his most ironic mood, from saying of God

Ah! l'on est par moments  
Tenté de lui fourrer le nez dans son ordure.

Such verses not only attest the lack of religious feeling in Hugo but even of that shadowy reverence which, in dying, the religious feeling may still leave behind. They are the gambols of a rhymester let loose into the field of poetry and kicking up his heels at heaven. My own final impression after reading the numerous pages that Hugo devotes to religion is that they, even when most serious, quite lack accent. He seems to have really felt nothing of religion in its personal aspects; contrition, humility, self-renunciation, mystic ecstasy, moral illumination remain as foreign to his imagination as to his experience. He knows neither the pains nor the raptures of religious emotion; the religion of the heart is a closed book to him. His ecstasies are only the divagations of a head set whirling by the vision of the astronomic infinite; it is the religiosity of the imagination

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standing tiptoe on Sirius and viewing its own colossal shadow endlessly projected through the void of space. But when the oracle speaks, what disillusionment! Hugo's religious feeling when it is translated into words takes shapes like this:

"Things are the pores through which God exudes. The universe perspires Deity. All the depths reveal him to all the surfaces. Whoever meditates sees the Creator oozing out of creation. Religion is the mysterious sweat of the infinite. Nature secretes the notion of God." To extract either religious meaning or pious emotion out of such oracles the reader would sweat in vain. Let us pass on.

The poems on his dead daughter are by far the most sincere and touching expressions of sentiment in Hugo's poetry. This portion of his work reveals what was the most amiable side of his nature, the one side of it that had the graces of simplicity and naturalness—his very genuine love for his children and his sympathetic understanding of child-nature in its simpler and more apprehensible forms. "Christopher Columbus only discovered America, I have discovered the child," he said humorously. His simplicity sometimes seems a little studied, sometimes too a little puerile, but these are only occasional shortcomings in a picture that is on the whole done with an almost constant felicity—shortcomings that are perhaps inevitable in poetry that confines itself so persistently to the lower strata of this charmed atmosphere, as Hugo's regularly does.

It is notable that in speaking of his children, his thought invariably reverts to their earliest childhood. This he traces and retraces in affectionate retrospect. This portion of his past is for him an enchanted garden in which he loves to take refuge. Here he becomes a child again in imagination and in sympathy, reviving with ever-fresh pleasure the innocent sports and gambols, the quaint conceits and roving fancies of that privileged age. Of what lies outside of its narrow pale, of all those more serious realities in life of which the childish mind also has its fragmentary dreamy foreshadowings, of all this part of the life of the child he says little or nothing—his children always come back to him out of the wider world to which they had strayed, as innocent and almost babe-like apparitions, still clad in the rosy light of childhood's dawn.

The poet thus reproduces childhood rather than interprets it. He views it from the outside, though always in its most fascinating aspects and its most graceful poses. It is the poetry of Lilliput. He hardly realizes all that the vague adumbrations of precocious experience,

groping in a world of spiritual symbols, add to the charm of childhood by vivifying and irradiating it through these sweet travesties of the solemnities, the high days and the holidays, of the impending future; and it is perhaps fortunate that Hugo has so seldom attempted to go beyond the confines within which he remains so delightfully poetical. When he does go beyond them, and when, instead of painting, he tries also to interpret the poetical mystery of childhood, Hugo is always in danger of becoming affected, false, sensual, and what the French call *alambiqué*. This is shown by the following passage in which the charm of the painting is, to my mind, utterly spoiled by the interwoven commentary. It may be noted that M. Renouvier, with whom I have the ill-luck again to disagree, quotes this very page precisely to exhibit the perfection of Hugo's charm as the poet of childhood. He says: "The splendor of the style, which is of marvelous beauty, is, so to speak, effaced by the sublimity of the sentiment which it translates."

"The two children were fast asleep. There was a strange ineffable mingling of breaths; it was more than chastity, it was ignorance; it was a nuptial night before the dawn of sex. The little boy and girl, naked and side by side, were during those silent hours lapped in the seraphic promiscuity of shadow; so much of visionary dreaming as infancy can harbor, floated from each to the other; starlight hovered perhaps under their closed lids; if the word marriage is not disproportionate here, they were husband and wife in the angelic fashion. Such innocence in such darkness, such purity in such an embrace, such anticipations of heaven are possible only to childhood, and no immensity can equal this miniature grandeur. Of all gulfs this is the deepest. The awe-inspiring perpetuity of the dead confined outside the bounds of life, the tireless malice of the Ocean greedy for shipwreck, the vast sheet of snow hiding shrouded forms, all this cannot approach the pathos of two infantine mouths that divinely touch in sleep and whose meeting is not even a kiss. A betrothal perhaps; perhaps a catastrophe. The unknown hovers over this juxtaposition. It is charming; who knows if it is not ominous? The heart is oppressed. Innocence is more supreme than virtue. Innocence is woven of a holy obscurity. They slept. They were wrapped in peace. They were warm. The nudity of their intertwining bodies amalgamated the virginity of their souls. They nestled there as it were in the bosom of the abyss."



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When Hugo sets up as the apostle and prophet of childhood, he of course grows emptily hieratic and absurd:

Dans l'enfant qui bégaie on entend Dieu parler.

But try as he may to put thought into his poetry of childhood, Hugo in his better period succeeds in introducing so little, and that of so light a quality, that we hardly notice it at all, and the pure stream is not rendered perceptibly turbid thereby. Later, in such works as "*L'Art d'être Grandpère*," he becomes fairly intolerable in his attitude of official interpreter of the divine mystery of childhood.

Hugo's picture of childhood remains in general a purely human vision with no touch of other-worldliness. For Wordsworth children are emanations of the divine, just as nature is its visible embodiment. They are oracles unconsciously babbling celestial secrets. A child, just issuing from babyhood, may, like the "vernal wood," utter the ineffable and ultimate secrets which we so vainly pursue along the arid tracks of thought. Those adorably inarticulate lisplings which so easily achieve a superhuman meaning because they have yet learned nothing of the inexorable walls behind which our reasoned thought is doomed to plod, those charmingly logicless fancies that find the infinite so immediately at hand because they enjoy such blissful ignorance of the frontiers of time and space, this strain of the angelical, philosophically so unconvincing but poetically so beautiful, are the side of the poetry of childhood that Wordsworth has chiefly turned to, and with which he has bound up—in perilously fragile fashion—some of his loftiest inspiration. Yet, confronted with reality, this seems to be the background of the picture rather than the picture itself. It is almost on the foreground of the picture that Hugo has dwelt, the sub-human rather than the supra-human aspects of childhood. He loves the baby-lisp because of its adorable meaninglessness, the baby-eye because of its sweet vacuity, the baby-limbs because of their charming helplessness. Childhood is for him only the most entrancing of marionette-plays; children are for him living dolls, escaped as it were from fairy-land, able to toddle and prattle, brimming with merriment and mischief (in his poems his children are always making arabesques in his manuscripts) sweetly irresponsible and unfathomably innocent.

In such poems as *Lorsque l'Enfant paraît*, Hugo is really at his best as a sentimental poet. Save for the jarring allusion to his critics

in the last stanza, this lyric is perfect in its kind, offering a naïve felicity of touch and a genuinely childish grace that have rarely been achieved in such purity of perfection by other poets. All his pictures of children that make a lasting impression portray this first auroral flush of dawning consciousness: the earliest apparition of the Thénardier children in "Les Misérables," the children in the burning tower in "Ninety-Three," the *Rose de l'Infante*. Even the vigorously sketched Gavroche owes his vitality chiefly to the fact that he does not really form an exception; he too is clothed with the childish halo of irresponsibility, and Hugo identifies him, as a *gamin de Paris*, with the angels. As always with what is not mere rhetoric in Hugo, this poetry is the poetry of instinct, of the very elementary paternal instinct, just as his best love-poetry is that which frankly voices the cry of the senses, and his best nature-poetry that which objectively renders the aspects of the outer world as mirrored in a sensuously delighted but quite unspeculative eye.

Despite the scattering universality of his themes, sentimental and other, there is one for which Hugo showed at all times a very special predilection: after his earlier experiments in the field of purely artistic poetry, after his resolve, dating from the "Feuilles d'Automne" (in 1831), to put thought and sentiment into the foreground of his work, he aimed to be pre-eminently the poet of humanity. But he unfortunately conceived his rôle in an ultra-democratic and revolutionary spirit which proved decidedly narrowing as well to his sympathies as to his outlook.

Instead of the refined and humane attitude of a truly civilized poet, we get the shallow and fanatical utterance of a partisan poet, who stands out not as a mediator but as an avenging minister of God's justice between those who exercise authority and those who suffer it, between aristocracy and populace, between rich and poor. Hugo's attitude is not that of a poet of the people, himself sprung from the popular soil and singing only its humble poetry because he knows no other. Burns is the poet with whom Hugo has least affinity. Hugo is in the ambiguous position of a renegade, a *Philippe Egalité* of humanitarianism, who feels bound to emphasize his hostility to his own class quite as much as he magnifies his sympathy for the class to which he has turned. Though theoretically an apostle of the people, he remains in actual fact inextricably intertangled with the class he was born and bred in, by social ties and tastes, by financial bonds, by mode of life, by love of luxury and power and wealth. This

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great democratic and socialistic poet is accordingly by turns a royal pensioner, a viscount, a peer, a baron, an academician, a legislator now ultra-conservative and now ultra-radical, and to the very end, and growingly, a millionaire. To atone for all these disqualifications, Hugo, so temperamentally given to exaggeration, feels obliged to exaggerate more than ever. As a result, his expression of humanitarian ideals comes to have an unpleasantly declamatory ring, a savor of demagoguery, a philanthropic diffusiveness, a fanatical one-sidedness that makes us suspect not only its sanity but its sincerity. In later life, he acknowledged the shallowness of his early attitude as a courtier of the king and a paladin of the church; we may well entertain misgivings lest his final attitude as a courtier of the people and an enemy of tradition, royalty, and ecclesiasticism, have something of the same fundamental hollowness. We can not but suspect that one who has enjoyed such varied experience as Hugo had of what is highest as well as of what is humblest in society, can not very deeply love the poor while at the same time so bitterly hating the rich—in the abstract. Hugo's humanitarianism bears a vulgar and hateful stamp; it is odiously denunciatory. It fixes its eye resolutely and exclusively on what can be attacked and condemned in the higher strata of society. It insists only on the shadows in the social organism. It looks askance at all tradition and authority, civil and ecclesiastical. It is a gospel of hate, of vulgar, unintelligent and calumnious hate. Some of its demagogic outbursts are among the most violently unreasonable that the hand of socialistic man has ever penned.

When one reflects that all his life Hugo made copy and capital out of his literary clients, the humble and the disinherited, one grows a little impatient at the full-mouthed self-glorification running through all his works:

J'ai penché ma tête  
Sur les souffrants, sur les petits.

One thinks of the noble spirits who gave their lives, truly and not metaphorically, to the poor and suffering, and who never found time to make copy or to proclaim their own merits, or even perhaps to think very insistently about them. But these were not *gens de lettres*.

With his characteristic love of contrast, Hugo usually pictures the rich seated at a gorgeous banquet with the poor watching them through the apparently uncurtained windows or the ill-closed doors:

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Le banquet hautain semble éclater de rire,  
Narguant le peuple assis à la porte en haillons.

Examples of this juxtaposition are innumerable in his poems. The rich are so constantly feasting, and the poor so obstinately starving, that one wonders how the former escape death from repletion and the latter from starvation—although the frequency with which the poet mentions his own alms-giving would seem to offer a perhaps sufficient explanation as to how the indigent managed to survive during the life and times of Victor Hugo.

Like most poets of partisan revolt, Hugo portrays poverty with a certain lack of intimate and genuine sympathy. He sees it entirely from the outside, and he sees it with one eye only—the other is fixed on the other half of the antithesis, wealth. It is worthy of remark that, despite his humanitarianism, the poems consecrated to the austere half of the antithesis, in which he deals with the short and simple annals of the poor, are, even in their occasional prolixity, essentially jejune, and rather conventional even on the pictorial side, which is surprising in the author of “*Les Misérables*”; while on the other hand he dwells with a lingering dalliance that superadds detail upon detail on the *Persicos apparatus* of elegant Epicurean living,

La soie et l’or, les lits de cèdre et de vermeil,  
Faits pour la volupté plus que pour le sommeil,  
Où, quand votre maîtresse en vos bras est venue,  
Sur une peau de tigre on peut la coucher nue.

The prodigality of detail with which this Babylonian revelry is painted hints at a secret complaisance, an unavowed gusto—on which the actual life of the poet furnishes only too clear a commentary. It is the *revanche* of the innate pagan artist upon the would-be social poet. From this point of view the austere *Noces et Festins* offers a piquant antithesis to the later and lighter *Fête chez Thérèse*, one of the most consummate bits of high-life poetry in existence. The festive atmosphere, the masquerading merry-makers, the frolicsome gaiety, the voluptuous disorder, everything is rendered with masterly fidelity and unrivalled richness of detail and color. It is a gorgeous canvas done in rhyme, with an opulence and an animation that make the eighteenth century *peintres des fêtes galantes* seem meagre in comparison. It is evident that it is in this region that Hugo is really in his element. The poet of the virtuous poor has proved to be in reality the poet of the idle—and far from virtuous—rich!



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Hugo is not, despite his reiterated claims, the poet of the common man. When he pleads his cause, it is always with a vulgar darkening of the tints, a gratuitous and extravagant portrayal of abject misery, which smells to Heaven—of rhetoric; it is rhymed and rhythmical muck-raking. Such a poem as *Chose Vue*, in the "Contemplations," seems like the recital of an impassioned fishwife, put into good French by a socialistic rhymers. Of the poem following it, the greater part would seem to have been produced by the same fishwife in a still more unhallowed mood, without any cooperation whatever. Hugo lavishes the black pigments and the revolting details till we are reminded of the amateurish awkwardness of the beggar whose father is dead, whose mother is sick, and who has seven famished infant brothers and sisters.

Qui grince des dents? L'homme. Et qui pleure? La mère.  
Qui sanglote? La vierge aux yeux hagards et doux.  
Qui dit: "J'ai froid"? L'aïeule. Et qui dit: "J'ai faim"? Tous.

This tone is a recurrent one:

Ses petits vont pieds nus l'hiver comme l'été.  
Pas de pain de froment. On mange du pain d'orge.

Et la mère, à côté de ce pauvre doux être  
Qui chantait tout le jour, toussait toute la nuit.

As to the truly poetical sides of poverty (which, it is true, most of us prefer to view with the added enchantment of distance), Hugo surveys them from the vantage point of such very discreet longinquity that we are inclined to think that the charm is not intrinsic at all, but is solely due to the remoteness of focus.

De loin, c'est quelque chose, et de près, ce n'est rien.  
(La Fontaine)

He is really sensible neither to the charms of poverty nor to its pathos. The charm he seeks chiefly in the time-honored conventions of drawing-room pastoralism, magnificently distorted in a haze of fancy; the pathos he seeks usually in the guise of physiologic tragedy. His knowledge of *les humbles* and the interest he feels in them have an air of superficiality. His beggars are weird apparitions of woe, wafted toward us like phantoms on the wings of night, coming none knows whence, bound none knows whither; his shepherds

are even more phantasmal creatures, Chaldæan and unreal, bedazzled by the gleam of visionary infinitudes and nocturnal skies; his rustics are ornamental lay-figures, gracefully filling up corners in his canvases.

The half-hidden poetry of humble life, the compensations of poverty, the sane and fortifying savor of rural toil, the pathos of the maimed lives, the narrowed horizons, the half-awakened consciousness, the sternness of a destiny reduced to the few fundamental realities of mere existence, how little echo all this finds in Hugo's poetry! The cultivated Englishman, though he were even more resolutely urban than Samuel Johnson himself, might learn to know and to love the country and the humble humanity that it breeds from the poetry of Burns or Wordsworth and of many lesser English poets, but no Parisian will ever derive the same initiation from Hugo's brilliant pages. How evidently a denizen of stageland is Hugo's poetical beggar who cries:

Allez en plaindre un autre.  
Je suis dans ces grands bois et sous le ciel vermeil,  
Et je n'ai pas de lit, fils, mais j'ai le sommeil.  
    . . . Calme, avec l'indigence  
Et les haillons je vis en bonne intelligence,  
Et je fais bon ménage avec Dieu mon voisin.

All Hugo's beggars have the same well spoken eloquence—all would seem to have quit the woods and the highway long enough at least to take a course in declamation at the Paris Conservatory, though without having improved the opportunity of incidentally making there the acquaintance and adopting the ways of their more civilized human brethren. Hugo's shepherd in *Magnitudo Parvi* has, of course, been expressly created for apocalyptic purposes:

Il est l'être crépusculaire.  
On a peur de l'apercevoir;  
Pâtre tant que le jour l'éclaire,  
Fantôme dès que vient le soir.

But even those of Hugo's shepherds who sleep at night, and those of his shepherdesses who actually guard flocks by day, seem also to have caught a glimpse of the artist who is painting them and to have posed themselves accordingly. In *Pasteurs et Troupeaux* Hugo introduces a shepherdess as a lively bit of color to dot his landscape. That is typical: that is the rôle which *les humbles* play in Hugo's

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poetry, when they do not serve as eloquent criers launching his political manifestoes.

Elle essuie aux roseaux ses pieds que l'étang mouille.

The flock is equally decorative and quite as prettily so.

Ses agneaux dans le pré plein de fleurs qu'il encense  
Bondissent, et chacun au soleil s'empourprant,  
Laisse aux buissons, à qui la bise le reprend,  
Un peu de sa toison, comme un flocon d'écume.

Though the breed has improved, are not these sheep, after all, lineal descendants from the beribboned flock that Mme. Deshoulières once promenaded on the slopes of the French Parnassus? It is pretty, very pretty indeed, but does not the transition from such poetry as this to a poem like Wordsworth's *Michael* give the impression of a sudden return to nature, of an abrupt exit from an artificial world of literature into the cool and bracing atmosphere of reality? It is a far easier transition from this shepherdess and her sheep to the fantastic unreality of

Le pâtre promontoire au chapeau de nuées,

and of the crested breakers,

La laine des moutons sinistres de la mer.

Even in the rare poems in which Hugo tries to subordinate the picturesque element, the sentiment is rarely what is most impressive. In *Petit Paul*, which aims at pure pathos, and which many greatly admire, the effect seems to me utterly banal. In *Les Pauvres Gens*, one of Hugo's greatest poetical successes, a poem that is indeed very human and pleasing, and it may be added, somewhat remote from his habitual manner, it is not after all by the faithful and sympathetic presentation of his central theme, nor even by the exceptional and genuine simplicity of the style, a thing rare indeed in Hugo's work, that he has achieved his unique success. If the poem offered nothing more, it would hardly lie very far beyond the range of a lesser poet, of Coppée, for example. It is not quite free even from Hugo's inevitable fault of theatricality in the tone of the narrative; and the occasional false touch likewise intrudes here also, as when the wife's love is described:

Elle prit son mari comme on prend un amant,

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(a verse that would seem to throw an unintended flood of light on French conjugal ethics) or when the heroine says:

S'il me bat, je dirai: Tu fais bien—

Was such then the habit of this worthy fisherman? Indeed, there is a fundamental vice of conception running through the whole poem. A woman finds two helpless babies lying beside their dead mother in a cold and deserted hovel. What else could she do but bring them to her home? It is a duty of simple humanity. To take is not to keep, and the deed does not pledge the future to a perhaps impossible sacrifice. But Hugo insists on seeing the matter from the ultra-dramatic viewpoint. What really lifts the poem so immeasurably above the level of *Coppée* is not the pathetic narrative but its accessories; it is the projection of the dainty vision of the sleeping infants against the gloomy but majestic background of the stormy ocean, so marvellously evoked in its savage mood and its relentless power, a background against which the human figures are very charmingly but by no means inimitably sketched. It is a triumph—a triumph, not of the poet of sentiment, but, as always, of the pictorial poet.

If, then, we call in question those critics who deny utterly the sensibility of Hugo, it remains true, nevertheless, that they are essentially in the right, because such sensibility as he displays in his poetry is not refined, nor profound, nor truly poetical. He felt, he sometimes even felt strongly, but he never felt deeply. His feeling is not truly poetical, because he never attempted to render it beautiful by making it conform to an ideal—except to the false ideal of melodramatic intensity, or the empty ideal of picturesque pomp; and his feeling is not humanly valid and authoritative, because he never attempted to ennoble it by purifying it from the stains and vulgarities of life on the mere sensual plane. It is sentiment conceived, as Matthew Arnold in his happy summary of Victor Hugo so well put it, by “the average sensual man, impassioned and grandiloquent,” who, if he know them at all, knows only from the outside those venerable forces which constitute the mystic bond that holds the world together, idealism, morality, and religion.

This essential superficiality of his nature, this spiritual emptiness, is what made it possible for Hugo to pose as a poet-prophet, singing of the kingdom to come, taking Jehovah under his protection and patronizing Jesus, while simultaneously celebrating with equal unction



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the pagan charms of *Sara la Baigneuse*, and devoting thousands of sexagenarian verses to Jeanneton and to the rural inns, which apparently were not over-nice as to the kind of guests they harbored. To treat with ultra-seriousness the sentiment of a poet who covers, without admitting any gaps of separation, so wide a range, and who amalgamates such hopelessly incongruous elements in proclaiming their equivalence or identity, would be an aberration of criticism. But, on the other hand, to seek in such poetry not only random and chaotic beauty and unreasoned and hazardous splendors but a genuine satisfaction for the deeper needs of the spirit is an aberration of naïve candor which it is surely the privilege and the function of criticism, so far as may be, to obviate.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE SATIRIC POET

No satire can be excellent when displeasure is expressed with acrimony and vehemence. When satire ceases to smile, it should be momentarily, and for the purpose of inculcating a moral. Juvenal is hardly more a satirist than Lucan: he is indeed a vigorous and bold declaimer, but he stamps too often, and splashes up too much filth.

LANDOR

“**T**O say that a man of genius has no wit is a great consolation for the men of wit who have no genius.”

Such was Hugo's indignant but pointed retort to the oft-repeated charge that he lacked the less important of these two passports to popularity. The rejoinder is sufficiently clever to make the accusation seem a trifle ungracious. Yet it countenances rather than rebuts the charge. Is there then, after all, occasion for withdrawing it?

There have been great poets who were not great wits. There have even been very great poets who were quite without a sense of humor. Wordsworth modestly said that he had been witty only once in his life,—and, on probing the facts, one can not but feel that in this instance he was not modest enough. It can, however, hardly be maintained that Hugo also belongs to the class of quite humorless poets. When he is not personally concerned, he has a certain sense of humor, not very keen and not very deep; yet it is an element, though a very minor one, in his genius and in his work. However, it is by no means a spontaneous and a constant quality. Hugo carries his wit about him as a sort of concealed weapon to be produced only in great emergencies—like a razor out of a darkey's boots. The emergency, it may be added, presented itself, and was invested with the attributes of both magnitude and duration. During twenty years Hugo was constantly indignant and occasionally witty. For twenty years he posed as the irreconcilable adversary and the titular satirist of Napoleon III and the Second Empire.

Fortune favored him by furnishing him an unparalleled opportunity—that of political exile. He seized it. He climbed to the top of a

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pedestal as high as the pillar of Simeon Stylites, and he remained on it as obstinately. But he differed in this from his prototype: The saint hauled up baskets of fishes and loaves piously contributed for his nourishment; Hugo would seem to have requested the Guernsey fishwives to hoist up to him a liberal supply of a very different article, one in which fishwives, the world over, deal quite as profusely. He became a modern Archilochus invoking the Muse of Billingsgate. Henceforth he openly erected Juvenal above Virgil, and secretly erected himself above Juvenal—though he took care to let the secret out from time to time. He classed satire as one of the *Quatre Vents de l'Esprit*, and even came to regard it as one of the corner-stones of his work. A chapter on Hugo as a satiric wit is accordingly indispensable in a study of his genius.

Although mere outer provocation is a little too much responsible for its manifestation, Hugo's wit has at the same time certain roots in his temperament. He was a man of exuberant vitality, and the constant flow of animal spirits, which is one of the more amiable aspects of his personality in social life, is the source of much of his humor. His admiration for Rabelais, unlike his admiration for Dante and Shakespeare (and perhaps even Virgil), is genuine, not a literary affectation or a gentle delusion. He occasionally laughs and shakes in Rabelais' easy-chair with a hilarity that reconciles us for the moment to the absence of its original occupant. Such humor as Hugo possesses is material, gross, related to well-conditioned blood and nerves, and to a digestion which, like the French Muse, finds peculiar pleasure in triumphing over difficulties. In its essence it is bourgeois and plebeian. It is, however, a strong and even pungent sauce that goes very well with the substantial viands set for us at the daily commons of life. The flavor is not delicate, but it is unmistakable. No exertion of our intellects is demanded, for the drollery is too broad to be missed even by the dullest; no special initiation and no effort to rise to the occasion are required, for we are appealed to on the almost animal level: a little warmth and a little exhilaration are all that is needed and we may laugh *à gorge déployée*. There are pages in Hugo's work where he has abandoned himself to this native farcical vein, pages of buffoonery, of wild hyperbole, of paradox run comically mad, pages which are hugely amusing and irresistibly provocative of stentorian cachinnation.

This poet, who so often unseasonably and painfully reminds us of Marivaux, will have the honor of having, after Rabelais, renewed

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in literature something which is the very opposite of *marivaudage*—something that one might call *batifolage gigantesque*, a sort of Cyclopean or Polyphemian playfulness calculated to elicit a six-foot smile from Brobdingnagian lips. Among all the diaphanous apparitions which Hugo so vainly whisked across the frontier of reality and constrained to bow and strut for a moment in the treacherous glare of the foot-lights, there moves one single figure, and one only, that impresses us as a being of flesh and blood, endued with vital warmth and living in his own right, instead of being engaged in eloquently translating into every variety of dramatic frenzy the solitary phrase: Victor Hugo created me, and I exist only to proclaim the glory of my creator. Don César de Bazan, in “Ruy Blas,” the genial amalgamation of the buffoon, the bandit, and the hero, is the one fairly plausible and truly amusing creation in the long gallery of Hugo’s chimeras. Hugo has given himself up here to such exuberance of fun that it seems as if he

Had meant to put his whole wit in a jest,  
And had resolved to live a fool the rest  
Of his dull life.

Hugo, however, is not as a rule satisfied to set this ordinary fare before us when he invites us to a literary feast. He is not content to amuse us as simply as he does his children, or his friends, or Juliette. He must concoct something more elaborate and more recondite; the mere home-brewed flow of animal spirits will not answer. He goes farther and farther afield for the pleasantries that he is to serve up. He goes so far that both wit and good sense lag behind, and it is only his master-faculty, his incredibly robust imagination, that triumphantly accomplishes the quest. His wit has abdicated to his fantasy. What is brought back is not a pleasantry, it is an image. The changeling is oftenest a cold and bloodless thing, unnatural and grotesque. It has no genial warmth, it is not truly human. It grins, but it can not make us reciprocate. It indulges in clownish antics, in colossal and distorted grimaces. Where we looked for the light graces of Esmeralda, we have encountered the hideous leer of Quasimodo. We may be surprised into a smile or scared into laughter, but our mirth is half unwilling and half condescending. Scarron could be suffered before Molière and Voltaire, but coming after them he seems antediluvian. It is Hugo’s satire, and his wit above all, that justify his description of himself as



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Un esprit non moqueur,  
Où naîtront aisément le songe et la chimère.

There is something factitious and repugnant to good taste in this exhibition of fantasy run mad, overleaping the barriers of good sense and naturalness and seeking to entertain us by the mere wildness of its acrobatics. We demand that wit should have some relation to good sense, should not transgress the proprieties of nature:

True wit is nature to advantage dressed.

The relation between this form of wit, divorced from sense, and Hugo's peculiar type of imagination, divorced from intellect, deserves to be noted, because at bottom the generative process is the same in his imaginative poetry and in his less soaring pages that are meant to be merely amusing. In his most serious poems, often in his highest flights, the train of imagery has an over-strained fantasticality that really belongs in the category of the burlesque. In his pleasantries Hugo has only to push a step further in the same direction—only a single step,—and many a time, even in his most solemn mood, carried along by his own momentum, he takes it and lands quite innocently in sheer burlesque. He has pushed out so far the limits of the realm of fancy, where he seeks his serious images, that his burlesque ones have to be brought in from the farther confines of the same territory. The two are not always differentiated even by the added shade of exaggeration which usually serves to distinguish the labor of his humor from the play of his fancy. If a poet writing for "Punch" wished to caricature the incongruities of modern Pindarism, he would find almost nothing to change in the whole canvas of Hugo's *Ibo*—unless indeed he actually chose to tone down its extravagance.<sup>1</sup> Such figures as the following, though emitted in all seriousness in Hugo's attack on Napoleon III, are irresistibly comic:

"Does not the man who measures off cloth hear the yardstick in his hand speak and say: It is a false measure that governs? Does not the man who weighs out food hear his scales raise their voice and say: It is a false weight that reigns?"

The following is not much better:

"She will recoil, our France, with a horrible shudder, from this monstrous crime which has dared to marry her in the dark and whose couch

<sup>1</sup> One is sometimes at a loss to know whether Hugo aims at seriousness or not. Let the reader try to settle this point in regard to *Contemplations*, I, II or II, I.

she has shared." That savors too much of the audacities of Italian Renaissance comedy to carry the burden of high tragedy that Hugo thought to convey. M. Lemaître confesses that he lost sums of money by wagering that certain verses read to him out of Hugo were fabrications of his parodists!

The incongruity caused by this wanton fancifulness is heightened by the added influence of the strong plebeian strain in Hugo, which shows so plainly in his defective taste and in his violent invective, and which also determines so largely the nature of his wit. The light touch, which belongs to the Frenchman of the salon, is vainly sought for in the Frenchman of the third estate. A coarse and jovial burlesque is the only form of pleasantry that the people in any land understand and prize. Burlesque has only to simulate refinement to fall into preciosity:

"This professor, when young, had one day seen a chambermaid's dress caught on a fender; he had fallen in love with this accident. The result was Miss Favorite." Burlesque is the normal form of Hugo's wit. It intrudes even into the treatment of the most poetically conceived themes. In *Insomnie* the Muse appears, bringing to the poet a verse which she has "seized in the pale clouds." The poet thereupon begins a dialogue such as might, with much more plausibility, figure as that of a drunken traveler and a facetious host conscientiously bent on rousing him at the ordered hour:

Je ronflais comme un bœuf; laisse-moi. C'est stupide! . . .  
—Paix-là! Va-t'en, bourreau! Quant au vers, je le lâche.  
Je veux toute la nuit dormir comme un vieux lâche.

Whereat the Muse exclaims:

Quoi! cette bête a goût au vil foin du sommeil!

There is no escape: "The angel presses Jacob, and the spirit holds the body," so the poet modestly rises "into the azure with Horace and into the darkness with Dante." What a mad medley of disparate tones! During his long sojourn at Guernsey, Hugo found many things in the Anglican manners and customs that displeased him. All was not beer and skittles for him, and the combination of temperance and piety particularly stirred his bile. The tee-totalers were unendurable—

Les titolleurs [sic] grisés par des carafes.  
Ils sont jeunes, plusieurs ont vingt ans, et, pendant  
Que, regardant la vie avec un œil pédant,  
Ils laissent se transir Betsy, Goton et Lise,  
L'eau qu'ils boivent leur sort du nez en chants d'église.

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In the same happy vein of facetiousness, referring to the statues which the English with "mistaken admiration" have erected in honor of Wellington, Hugo cries out: "Though you be nothing more than an Arthur Wellesley, they will make you a colossus, and the ladies will dedicate you to yourself, all naked, with the inscription: To Achilles." That is exactly the coarseness of wit and the ugliness of temper that we expect from a thorough plebeian. Why should we be surprised if Hugo tells us presently that "Attic salt and Gallic buffoonery have at bottom the same flavor"? For him, alas, they did!

A convincing proof that Hugo is not truly satirical is that he so readily lays himself open to satire at every turn. He has no sense whatever of the ridiculous in himself, and, though exhibiting much good-will in the matter, he shows very little skill in detecting it in others. It is very seldom that his satire lays hold of men and things by their ridiculous side. Usually he is carried away by his passion, and is betrayed into stormy invective, sometimes very eloquently tempestuous and splendidly ill-natured, but impressive mainly by its volume and its violence, by its threat of uprooting and destroying indiscriminately everything in its path with the unselective injustice of a thunderbolt—and, sometimes, alas! by a fatal resemblance to the thunderbolts that are manufactured for the consumption of juvenile patriots on national holidays, and which have a trick of merely sputtering when meant to explode. On the other hand, when he is not carried away by anger, when he affects the perfidious playfulness of the satirist, Hugo abandons himself to fancy and gives to his model a gratuitous distortion for which its outlines offer no warranty whatever. There is no suggestion of a copy from reality; we are in the presence of a new and quite unrelated original. This is not satire. These picturesque contortions and comical grimaces, imposed upon visibly unwilling matter, are to true satire, biting and corrosive by what it contains of merciless observation, precisely what farce is to comedy. The satiric portions of the "Châtiments" are a series of buffooneries in which Napoleon III is cast for the part of chief clown, remaining always recognizable thanks to his *moustache en croc*, the one feature that is common to the original and to the caricature.

Hugo's native bent for fantastic distortion, though it may arbitrarily impart a comic aspect to reality, is ill adapted for satire, which does not so much impart the comic aspect as find it, at least in germ, already present. Hugo substitutes invention for observation, and thus foregoes the convincing power of reality. He always transformed

everything he observed; when he applies himself to satire, he ceases to observe at all. He is too fond of bold strokes, of striking effects, of imposing and colossal hyperbole, to have any talent for the slow and delicate processes by which the satiric poet, in his more uncharitable moods, while pretending to copy in its minutest details the model he works from, with perfidious ingenuity darkens the lines and imperceptibly falsifies the features until he has elicited an unmistakable grimace in his copy which we had not seen in the original—but which we can not help seeing there henceforth.

This dominance of imagination in Hugo's satiric poetry has caused him to be hailed as the inventor of a new kind of satire, lyric satire—a discovery at least adumbrated in many of his predecessors, and something more than adumbrated in Byron, not to go back to the Italians or even the Greeks. But, if we reflect that Hugo is also the author of lyrical dramas, of lyrical epics, and even of lyrical novels, we may not be very far wrong in surmising that, just as it was the lack of the dramatist's and the novelist's fundamental feeling for life and character that condemned him to remain so unseasonably though often so splendidly lyrical in work where the lyric note, when it enters, should enter only as a discreetly subdued accessory, so he was condemned to produce lyric satire simply because his lyric talent was so great and his satiric talent so slight. It is, in fact, so very slight that one may almost search through the whole volume of the "*Châtiments*" for the traditional elements of satire without becoming at all convinced that they are there, even as seasoning to the lyricism and the invective. Does not this suggest that Hugo's merit of invention here consists only in his having remained a not altogether willing slave to his master faculty, to his picturesque and rhetorical talent? The result is often dazzling—that is undeniable. The contraband article is sometimes of a more precious substance than genuine satire could possibly be. There is more poetry, and doubtless greater capacity for yielding poetic pleasure, in a few of the very finest of the "*Châtiments*" than in the cleverest of Horace's satires. But for all that, they have, in so far as they stoop to attempt it, none of the convincing power of real satire.

The essence of satire is ingeniously persuasive aspersion. Not only must the muddy projectiles thrown be so skilfully compounded and so dexterously flung that most of them will stick, and the rest of them leave stains, but the thrower must also succeed in the more



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difficult task of justifying his act and of inspiring the bystanders with his mood. This Hugo's satiric verse rarely accomplishes in any degree whatever. His throwing is not dexterous; he carries on a brutal bombardment with boulders. It is too violent, too murderous in intent, to seem merely satiric. We instinctively feel impelled to inquire into the justice of the assault, and to have the case of the mauled and bedraggled victim presented. As soon as the *moi* of the poet appears, and it is never long absent, we feel that the quarrel is purely personal, that Hugo hates those against whom he writes with a self-sustaining hatred quite independent of the things he censures in them—a hatred which is the generating cause of his censure. Who can accept his picture, in the days of Napoleon III, of the French Academy, into which he had, for the fourth time, solicited entrance only ten years earlier?

"The Academy, under the empire, had sunk to so low a level, from politeness no doubt, that the emperor might well have been admitted to it; he might have believed that he was among his literary peers there, and his majesty would nowise have impaired that of the forty." And he quotes from a doubtless pretended colleague: "I vote for the admission of M. Louis Bonaparte to the Academy and the galleys."

Who can escape the feeling that it would be the height of naïveté to let his opinion of Napoleon III and his group, of Pius IX and the ecclesiastic primates of France, or of Montalembert, or of Veuillot, be in the least degree shaped by Hugo's furious diatribes? Yet genuine satire forces us to laugh at its victims, and makes us reluctant to think afterwards that we have been induced to do so unjustly. Hugo does not laugh at his victims, he curses them—which implies a remoter mood for most readers and one less readily courted. When Pope hints such sorry but such very human faults in Addison, all the geniality of the "Spectator" hardly avails to stifle a vaguely disquieting apprehension that Pope may be at least partly in the right. But when Hugo brutally denominates Nisard an ass, even though he returns twenty times to the charge, we merely think of Nisard's monumental "History of French Literature" and regret that this very distinguished brand of asininity is not more common. When we find the author of "Colomba" and "Carmen" set down as an imbecile, we can not repress the wish that Victor Hugo, in those solemn encyclicals with which he honored his correspondents, had himself oc-

casionally stooped to indulge in such delectable imbecilities as make up the "Lettres à une Inconnue." When he asserts that the new German emperor had not

Beaucoup plus de caboche qu'un rat,

does he in any degree convince us? Or to come nearer home, can we see anything more substantive than Hugo's own displeasure when he thus reviles the historian Bancroft for his espousal of Germany's cause in 1871?

Ayez quelque titre à la haine,  
Et l'on verra. Sinon, allez-vous-en. Un nain  
Peut à sa petitesse ajouter son venin  
Sans cesser d'être un nain, et qu'importe l'atome?

or when on the same occasion he attacks President Grant in this apostrophe to John Brown?

Spectre, défais le nœud de ton cou, viens, ô juste,  
Viens et fouette cet homme avec ta corde auguste!

To call distinguished contemporaries asses and imbeciles and atoms may be intensely lyrical—and, if so, we are living in a fairly poetic age, after all—but it is certainly not satirical. Many will feel that this modern version of Apollo skinning Marsyas alive, and at the same time abusing him in violent metaphors, suggests a suspension of both the lyrical and the satirical impulses in favor of a far more commonplace one—spiteful hatred.

That it was a mistake on Hugo's part to eschew the witty satiric manner of the poets who belong to the family of Horace, no one will maintain who is familiar with his occasional attempts in this vein.

Cambyse, j'en conviens, eût eu ce cœur de roche  
De faire asseoir Troplong sur la peau de Baroque;  
Au bout d'un temps peu long,  
Il eût crié: Cet autre est pire! Qu'on l'étrangle!  
Et, j'en conviens encore, eût fait asseoir Delangle  
Sur la peau de Troplong.

But if it was not an error, it hints very decidedly a limitation. Eloquent lyricism and fulminating philippics were the nearest approach to satire that was possible for Hugo's violent and rhetorical genius. What there is of the conventional ingredients of pointed and witty satire in the "Châtiments" might have been dropped out without perceptibly altering the volume—except for the better. It is not, as

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has been said, that Hugo is altogether without wit. In the heavy pack of varied gifts that he carries with him, his wit is not the lightest one. Hugo is seldom weighty—save when he jests. His witticisms refuse to float on the stream of his eloquence; their superior specific gravity carries them straight to the bottom. But there the patient and enduring diver may unearth considerable treasure.

As an illustration of Hugo's complete emancipation from the traditional notion of satire, consider the *Expiation*, the longest, and for many the most admirable poem in the "Châtiments." It was originally an epic fragment—and was converted into satire only as an after-thought, so that Napoleon III, against whom it is directed, is introduced only in the last page! In similar manner, a whole volume, "Le Pape," originally a eulogy of Pius IX, who had at first the good fortune to please Hugo, was, when this Pope ended by displeasing him, converted into a satire by the easy process of prefixing a brief prologue and affixing a few lines of epilogue!

Indignant eloquence and stormy philippic may, as Hugo's master, Juvenal, has shown us, yield very powerful poetry; and in this kind Hugo has unquestionably achieved splendid possibilities such as Juvenal never dreamed of. At its best, Juvenalian satire may even rise—or affect to rise—into a finer ether and look down on the spectacle of human things from a sublimer height than its less serious Horatian sister. But if Hugo's genius enables him at times to set one foot there, his personality will seldom suffer him to set down the other also. The lofty spirit of patriotism, the disinterested forgetfulness of self in concern for the general welfare, even the broad sweep of vision that views human affairs from the historical standpoint, may furnish inspiration and eloquence to the adversary of an iniquitous and tyrannical government. But Hugo's grievances are so much connected with himself that they seem always suspiciously personal. His patriotism seems mainly self-centred, his inspiration impresses us as profoundly egotistic. His indignation has too much alloy of hurt vanity and disappointed ambition.

Jamais du poignet des poètes,  
Jamais, pris au collet, les malfaiteurs n'ont fui!  
J'ai fermé sur ceux-ci mon livre expiatoire;  
J'ai mis des verrous à l'histoire.  
L'histoire est un bain aujourd'hui.

History is in very truth become a bagnio, and we enter it only to see the poet, in his rôle of executioner, brand and torture his victims,

incarcerated and condemned by this poetical Judge Jeffreys, with a ferocity as indiscriminate as it is implacable. There is no hint of gradation in punishment, save in the added virulence displayed against those who have especially offended the irate poet. It is a *décembrisade*, a pitiless massacre of all the characters and reputations that had not emigrated from France in the wake of the fleeing poet. The hate displayed is the most truculent and vindictive that has ever been translated into rhyme. The primitive man that occasionally slumbers intact under the incrustation of habit and convention in the man of to-day has here quite broken through the arresting layers and has emerged in all his untamed savagery. Hugo, in his rôle of poet-prophet, had all his life declaimed against the death-penalty; Hugo, in his rôle of satirist, says:

Tu peux tuer cet homme avec tranquillité.

The realm of rhyme has become a poetic Corsica, where the poet lies in wait ready to stab with his metric weapons not only Napoleon III but every one that aids or abets him, or suffers his government, or inhabits his empire. Of justice, as of restraint, there is no question. The poet deals damnation round the land with a freehandedness that did not always characterize his dealings in other things that may be more legally tendered. The episode has the interest of a vendetta transplanted into an age when the stiletto has to be replaced by the alexandrine.

La Muse, entre deux vers, tout vivants, les scia.

God is invoked here very much as the Madonna used to be invoked by the Calabrian brigands setting out for an assassination. And not only God and Christ are invoked, but Æschylus and Dante are each called upon a score of times, and Juvenal at least two score, to contemplate the baseness of Hugo's enemies; and all of the above, reënforced by still others, are adjured with still more distressful frequency to be witnesses of the poet's sublime reprobation and defiance of these "hyenas, jackals, wolves, not dreamed of by Buffon."

Even were the men whom Hugo attacks as vile and abject as his frantic verses paint them, one could hardly help feeling that in thus vengefully gloating over them through several thousand lines of ingeniously varied invectives and uningeniously recurrent epithets, the



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poet has, by this unsanctified use of his talents, diminished by half the distance separating him from even the very lowest of his enemies. And we know, too, that even these were, according to the calmer verdict of history, not half so black as he paints them.

It is really not so much indignation that makes the verses here as it is hate. Hugo is literally blinded with rage, *il voit rouge*, and this is not the most auspicious condition for satiric perspicacity. What secret stains, what subtle and disguised tortuosities of character does he unveil in Napoleon III? What deadly faults does he cunningly unearth and drag forth to the light of day? What, in fine, does he reproach him with? Usually he reproaches him with being a monkey imitating a man, with being a libertine, a thief, an assassin, a bandit, a tiger, a pig—especially a pig—all of which epithets belong to a category of satire in which Parisian coachmen and rag-pickers might almost be ill-advised enough to dispute the poet's primacy. The very intensity of Hugo's hate disarms him. He is quite without the calmness and the patience needed for spying out and exploiting the defects in the armor of his adversary; the impetuous precipitancy of a hatred clamoring for immediate vent and vengeance will not suffer him to barb his shafts or to dip them in the slowly distilled venom of satiric wit; he hurls at his foes intact the huge logs out of which he should have carved his arrows;

On est Tibère, on est Judas, on est Dracon,

and also Louvel, Lacenaire, Troppmann, Poulmann, Soufflard, Schinderhannes, Cartouche, Mandrin—I am sure that Hugo has called Napoleon III Mandrin almost as often as he has called himself sublime.

The whole Newgate calendar of France and the neighboring countries has been ransacked for abusive synonyms. The sewers of Paris, reinforced by that of Rome, the gutters and the slaughter-house runlets, along with other more odorous but less mentionable conveniences of civic housekeeping, have all been pressed into service to transport down to posterity's nose as much of his victims as consents to hang together. The whole underground world of the French language has been explored through its remotest veins to furnish matter of offense. We are indeed in the presence of the *rhéteur à la bouche d'airain*, of a shameless Muse that has flung aside not only the last reminiscence of delicacy but even the last rag of decency. The poet's imagination is laid open without barriers, it is become a public place. Though

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we move more cautiously than in Italian by-ways, our circumspection is vain. While our right foot is trying to avoid

Le lavabo vidé des pâles courtisanes,

our left foot is inadvertently planted in

Ce que Trimalcion vomit sur le chemin.

Hugo devotes a hundred lines—without wandering from his subject—to the sewer of Rome:

On approche et longtemps on reste l'œil fixé  
Sur ce tas monstrueux dans la bourbe enfoncé,  
Jeté là par un trou redouté des ivrognes,  
Sans pouvoir distinguer si ces mornes charognes  
Ont une forme encor visible en leurs débris  
Et sont des chiens crevés ou des Césars pourris.

Under the imposing flux of words there is really a suggestion of impotence, of fumbling malice perpetually stooping over the mud to pick up projectiles and suffering wrathful frustration in its effort to clutch any of sufficient cohesiveness to ensure disaster to the human targets.

Non, non, maître Rouher, vous êtes un faquin,  
Fould, vous êtes un fat, Suin, vous êtes un cuistre.

Ivre deux fois, immonde encor plus que féroce,  
Pourceau dans le cloaque et loup dans le charnier.

[Napoléon III]

Montre à Clio son nez meurtri de pommes cuites,  
Son œil éborgné de gros sous.

Il tresse sa moustache en croc et la caresse,  
Sans que sous les soufflets sa face disparaisse,  
Sans que, d'un coup de pied l'arrachant à Saint-Cloud,  
On le jette au ruisseau, dût-on salir l'égout.

Tu prétends, toi, maraud, goujat parmi les rustres,  
Que je parle de toi, qui lasses le dédain,  
Sans dire hautement: cet homme est un gredin!

These verses exhibit the formula according to which the greater part of the "Châtiments" are composed. The heat of contemporary passion once cooled, no satire could be more essentially innocuous, nor, when grown antiquated, more inexorably wearisome.

It is the fate of political satire to become antiquated. Hugo was

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at least partially right when he said: "If any work of art has the misfortune of making common cause with political truths and of mingling with them in the combat, so much the worse for the work of art; after the victory it will be useless." The "Châtiments" suffer from being too local; we cannot appreciate as intimately as Hugo's contemporaries the merits of the quarrel—and it is not our quarrel. We can now enjoy the "Châtiments" only with a certain detachment, as we do a dog-fight—in which our dog is not taking part, or as we do the milling-match between Dares and Entellus. This is partly the fault of the subject, but it is also in part Hugo's fault. We do not wholly relish the murderous savagery with which he sinks his teeth into his adversary's throat. It is not a duel fought according to a code, but an assault with intent to kill. And how constantly the combat degenerates into a brawl! Incapable of the swift rapier-thrusts that such a quarrel demands, Hugo is forced to content himself with the sorry substitution for satiric wit of an exhaustless lingual incontinence. Unfortunately, nothing has so overpowering a flavor of vulgarity as this long-winded fury. Page upon page of this unchecked diatribe is æsthetically as appalling as a quarrel between leisurely marketwomen. The reader of taste feels at every turn an instinctive recoil, as if he were witnessing some gross impropriety committed by an ill-bred man. After exhausting the external and historic features of the *coup d'état*, what does Hugo say that is really convincing in his attacks on the adherents of the Second Empire? One reads the indictment from beginning to end only to learn that they have committed the crime of being imperialists—unless one can find further convincing proofs of iniquity in such verses as these:

Ces gueux ont commis plus de crimes qu'un évêque  
N'en bénirait,

or in the subtle insinuation imbedded in the line

Saint-Arnaud qui vole autrement qu'un oiseau.

Hugo calls his adversaries *dogs*, *niggers*, *bandits*, and consigns them with mechanically recurrent periodicity to the sewer, the gutter, or the galleys, but he does not put us in a mood to ratify the sentence. We know that he speaks as one in wrath, and that his better self says:

Ma pente est de bénir dans l'enfer les maudits  
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—though it is true that, when his enemies are in question, he seems disposed to postpone doing so until they have been safely consigned there.<sup>1</sup> When he says that Veuillot envenomed his pen by using Flanche's (rare) bath-water for ink, do we feel quite sure that it is Veuillot or Flanche who is ridiculous? And when he tells us that Veuillot was without a home and without a valise, do we share his indignation at such extreme impecuniosity? When he accuses Montal-embert of leaning over the altar and drooling, does he succeed in persuading us that history is wrong in asserting that the illustrious parliamentary had pitilessly routed and ridiculed the poet-politician in oratorical jousts? When he accuses Veuillot of being the son of a *Javotte*, are we persuaded of anything—except that this is, as M. Lemâitre says, an abominable verse? When he accuses a senator of having formerly lived in a state of indigence so profound that he was compelled to circumvent the malice of winter by wearing two pairs of trousers (whose holes luckily did not superimpose), does he incline us irresistibly to the belief that such unconventional though doubly modest gear really implies any hidden moral obliquity? The satirist, like the spearman, should aim his shafts only at the noble organs where they may prove mortal: the head or the heart of his adversary. And will not the judicious grieve to hear such sartorial shortcomings made a matter of reproach by a poet who himself, only a few years previously, boasted that he wore “a twenty-five franc overcoat and a hat somewhat the worse for wear?”

Yet, if Hugo has not the talent for finding those unforgettable phrases which really characterize, and which etch an ineradicable stain upon a name, he sometimes by a quite opposed method succeeds in attaining to a powerful satiric eloquence. Thanks to his limitless command of the resources of rhetoric, his sonorous verse, rising and swelling with magnificent amplitude and cumulative power, makes us think at times of an angry Neptune riding on the crest of the waves, constraining them with his puissant breath and rolling them before him as if to heap up to the very heavens the foaming mass of the ocean in order to engulf in mountainous submersion the helplessly tossing and puny objects of his wrath.

<sup>1</sup> His better self speaks similarly in his letters:

“No, no, my friend, I feel no personal grief. I thank God for all He has deigned to do with me, for the trial which I am undergoing, for the ruins among which I meditate. I find good in adversity, good in injustice,” etc.

(Letter to Villemain, March 19, 1854.)



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O Carrare! O Paros! ô marbres pentéliques!  
O tous les vieux héros des vieilles républiques!  
O tous les dictateurs de l'empire latin!  
Le moment est venu d'admirer le destin.  
Voici qu'un nouveau dieu monte au fronton du temple.  
Regarde, peuple, et toi, froide histoire, contemple.  
Tandis que nous, martyrs du droit, nous expions,  
Avec les Périclès, avec les Scipions,  
Sur les frises où sont les victoires aptères,  
Au milieu des Césars, traînés par des panthères,  
Vêtus de pourpre et ceints du laurier souverain,  
Parmi les aigles d'or et les louves d'airain,  
Comme un astre apparaît parmi ses satellites,  
Voici qu'à la hauteur des empereurs stylites,  
Entre Auguste à l'œil calme et Trajan au front pur,  
Resplendit, immobile en l'éternel azur,  
Sur vous, ô panthéons, sur vous, ô propylées,  
Robert Macaire avec ses bottes éculées!

That is pure rhetoric, though splendid and powerful rhetoric; but of satire it contains nothing beyond an abusive epithet and a picturesque indictment of the emperor for having boots worn down at the heels. And being pure rhetoric, it lacks that underlying vein of deep and indignant truthfulness which alone can make denunciatory satire convincing. This seal of truthfulness, which belongs to a grand and noble nature wounded by the spectacle of meanness and villainy, is not to be found in the "Châtiments." Talent, however cunning, can not simulate it with complete success. The rarer pages where Hugo assumes this tone, are more than neutralized by the far too frequent pages where his tone is as low as his subject.

The French critics appear to have a singular faculty of overlooking the moral aspect in reading the "Châtiments" and of enjoying this superb *tempest in a cranium* with a purely æsthetic detachment as complete as that with which an inhabitant of Cheapside might view a conflagration in the West End. They seem troubled by no inward qualms at this sorry spectacle of a quondam prophet and irradiating center of celestial illumination thus incongruously demeaning himself and throwing wide open the windows of his soul to reveal the foul shapes and ugly phantasms that dwell in its recesses.

Can we say with Renouvier that any indulgence, even justified, on the poet's part, would have been a great pity, because French literature would have lost "an imprecation that is without parallel in any language?" Is it not for the moralist, for whom poetry is more than

a mere *jeu d'esprit*, a somewhat dubious satisfaction to be told that the "Châtiments" are Hugo's masterpiece, because here at last he is sincere? Is sincerity, on so low a plane as that of mere hate, poetically acceptable? Can we altogether share the enthusiasm even of a restrictive moralist like Brunetière, who, though regarding the book as an evil act, finds it nevertheless, for that very reason, all the more inspired, "a fine book, all aflame with wrath, resplendent with bile, the masterpiece of satire"? Can we help viewing with a certain concern this not very decorous spectacle of a frenzied old gentleman, "all aflame with wrath and resplendent with bile," throwing random mud whose foulness is not sufficiently diluted with the waters of wit to stick where it flattens out, and which is hurled at the despot with such womanish wildness that every figure standing in the neighborhood is imperilled—figures some of them of great and real dignity? To many a personage of the imperial régime Hugo owes the same apology as the nocturnal *vitrioleuse* in the street-ballad offers to her hapless victim: "I beg your pardon, sir; really, I meant this for my ex-lover, my accursed Louis!"

This comparison brings us down to a somewhat vulgar region, and in truth there is no other satire that moves on so immitigably low a level as the greater portion of the "Châtiments." Hugo has had the dubious honor of introducing into the categories of poetry what the French call *le bas journalisme*. He has brought down the Muse to the level of the daily press, and seems bent on proving that he can outdo even the coryphæi of abusive journalism in scurrility and violence.

In reading certain of the "Châtiments," one involuntarily feels that such verses were written not to be read, but to be declaimed, or rather bellowed, from leathern lungs, by some mighty-mouthed performer bestriding a foot-lighted stage, where, framed in the yellow glare of the blazing gas-jets, he is seen defiantly hovering above the swelling flood of vituperation so eloquently vomited forth, towering in grandiose and superhuman majesty before the dazzled eyes of the spectator amid the accompaniment of orchestral thunders and crashes of deafening melody.

O Dieu vivant, mon Dieu! prêtez-moi votre force,  
Et moi, qui ne suis rien, j'entrerais chez ce Corse,  
Et chez cet inhumain;  
Secouant mon vers sombre et plein de votre flamme,  
J'entrerais là, Seigneur, la justice dans l'âme,  
Et le fouet à la main,

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Et retroussant ma manche ainsi qu'un belluaire,  
Seul, terrible, des morts agitant le suaire,  
    Dans ma sainte fureur,  
Pareil aux noirs vengeurs devant qui l'on se sauve,  
J'écraserai du pied l'autre et la bête fauve,  
    L'empire et l'empereur!

When Hugo said to Napoleon III

Ah! tu finiras bien par hurler, misérable,

the emperor might have retorted that it was the poet who had set him the example. Once launched on this shoreless sea, Hugo goes on and on, till ideas, facts, taunts, gibes alike fail him, and only the dictionary remains, till he must unpack his heart with words and fall a-cursing like a very drab. He has no alternative but to fall back on the rich resources of his Thesaurus, on an ignoble vocabulary of insult, where he still proves himself, in very truth, an incomparable master of the vernacular—though recalling a little those disputants who in the ardor of reciprocal vituperation seem progressively oblivious of the real subject of dispute.

That subject,—let us not, like the poet, forget it,—is patriotism, the love of the exile for his enslaved country and his indignation at the stain that is put upon her honor, at the barrier that is flung across her path and that shuts her from access to the high place among the nations to which her destiny calls her. In the “Châtiments” Louis Bonaparte was really a most effective, though an unacknowledged, collaborator. Hugo’s most deadly arms against the emperor were really those which the latter himself furnished. The additional ones, which the poet fetched forth from the armory of his wit, were for the most part the antiquated weapons of the stone age, insult and epithet. Louis Bonaparte furnished Hugo with the facts of the December days, which in their own unadorned brutality were far more scathing than all the commentary with which the satiric poet framed this text. The usurper’s criminal method of seizing power, his oblique devices for entrenching himself in it, the proscription, banishment, and imprisonment of his adversaries, the seamy and sordid past of the hero of this dubious epic, the tragic episodes connected with the *coup d’état*, what a superb background all these things offered to the patriotic poet capable of seeing them in due perspective!

Hugo is too much an artist to fail wholly of seeing and grasping

these possibilities. When he does not spoil his advantages by losing his temper or by wildly exaggerating the facts, that is, on the rare occasions when his genius is not betrayed by his defects of taste and character, he produces admirable philippics, eloquent bursts of patriotic fury, and best of all, a few exceptionally beautiful and moving poems in which the tragic pathos of his theme and the exquisite melody of his verse combine to give us, as in *Nox*, a dirge steeped in sadness, or in *Puisque le juste est dans l'abîme*, a wild sea-song full of plaintive lyricism. In a few pages also, in which the poet quite forgets the satiric intention of his work in a rapture of purely lyric passion, his Muse rises high above the sordid and sullied atmosphere to which he has confined it, and proves itself once more what the Muse always should be, a bird of song and not a bird of prey.

Oh, laissez! laissez-moi m'enfuir sur le rivage!  
 Laissez-moi respirer l'odeur du flot sauvage!  
 Jersey rit, terre libre, au sein des sombres mers;  
 Les genêts sont en fleur, l'agneau pâit les prés verts;  
 L'écume jette aux rocs ses blanches mousselines;  
 Par moments apparaît, au sommet des collines,  
 Livrant ses crins épars au vent âpre et joyeux,  
 Un cheval effaré qui hennit dans les cieux!

This is beautiful picturesque poetry, offering all the splendor of Leconte de Lisle, but thrilled with a wild animation quite beyond the reach of the less inspired master. It is not lyric satire, but it is something far finer, it is lyric eloquence. Unfortunately, these occasional bits of genuine poetry are but thinly scattered oases in this extensive desert of invective. They are happy accidents, auspicious artistic contrasts and high lights, in which the poet's genius has surpassed his intent. They are not his mood, they are exceptions to his mood. His genius does not surrender itself in consecrated singleness of purpose to the inspiration, to the charming or noble image that it has stumbled upon; these happy deviations are only momentary, and when the moment is past, the enemy again fixes his attention and he flings aside the inspiration or the image that had arrested his genius, in order to unpack his bundle of epithets. The spell is broken; it is in vain that he presently returns to take up again the resplendent thing of beauty that he had dropped; he seems only a drunken torch-bearer who picks up his half extinguished torch out of the mire to describe with it a grand and dazzling circle in the air before plunging it back again for good.



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Even in his higher flights, the personality of the poet is often obtrusively dominant. The patriotism is of a sadly alloyed kind. It expresses itself habitually in the form of rhymed proclamations of the poet's attitude toward history and toward France. It is himself more than his country that he sings. Happily, something of the dignity of the subordinated and often submerged portion of his theme reflects upon the poet and swells out his sonorous rhetoric into fragmentary but proud and moving eloquence and dazzling poetry. Of this kind, nothing is more famous or more typical than the closing lines of *Ultima Verba*:

Devant les trahisons et les têtes courbées,  
Je croiserai les bras, indigné, mais serein.  
Sombre fidélité pour les choses tombées,  
Sois ma force et ma joie et mon pilier d'airain!

Oui, tant qu'il sera là, qu'on cède ou qu'on persiste,  
O France! France aimée et qu'on pleure toujours,  
Je ne reverrai pas ta terre douce et triste,  
Tombeau de mes aïeux et nid de mes amours!

Je ne reverrai pas ta rive qui nous tente,  
France! hors le devoir, hélas! j'oublierai tout.  
Parmi les éprouvés je planterai ma tente.  
Je resterai proscrit, voulant rester debout.

J'accepte l'âpre exil, n'eût-il ni fin ni terme,  
Sans chercher à savoir et sans considérer  
Si quelqu'un a plié qu'on aurait cru plus ferme,  
Et si plusieurs s'en vont qui devraient demeurer.

Si l'on n'est plus que mille, eh bien, j'en suis! Si même  
Ils ne sont plus que cent, je brave encor Sylla;  
S'il en demeure dix, je serai le dixième;  
Et s'il n'en reste qu'un, je serai celui-là!

These verses have a royal stride. The expression is perfect. Their crystalline purity of diction is permeated by an evenly diffused but flaming intensity. The attitude has a gravity and a dignity and the utterance a ringing accent that makes one almost unwilling to acknowledge that they have also a touch of the theatrical. Yet if we throw off the spell of the poet's eloquence and submit the verses to that severe but final test of great poetry, if we examine the thought that abides after the charm of the music and the witchery of the words have died away, must we not confess that the lines are pervaded by an over-emphatic personal animus, by an artistically effective but morally reprehensible

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suggestion of vainglory? In a world so populous as ours, it seems a trifle ungracious to wish to pose as the only just man, even though the laws of æsthetics may suggest that a pedestal is apt to seem crowded if it hold more than a single figure.

Pour soutenir le temple il suffit d'un pilier;  
Un Français, c'est la France; un Romain contient Rome.  
Et ce qui brise un peuple avorte aux pieds d'un homme.

If the poet is generous here, it is assuredly neither toward his country—nor toward the other proscribers. Some of them, though they had not like him burned their bridges behind them by irrevocably flaming speech, persisted more quietly but quite as resolutely in exile till the last, while others, more forgetful of self and more mindful of their country than Hugo, consented to return that they might express in deeds a love which the poet was content to express only in words. There were, besides, many men (of far nobler spirit than Hugo) who rightly felt that the true patriot best serves his country by remaining at his post and performing his appointed task—rather than by deserting the ship because he does not like the new captain. But Hugo is capable of subordinating even God himself to the æsthetic exigencies of the pedestal. He says:

En cet instant où Dieu peut-être échoue,

(that is, in 1870),

Aujourd'hui que le monde autour de toi s'écroule,  
Me voilà!

Hugo re-entered his country in the dark days of the war—but he re-entered it with a stage-stride.

Moreover, even Hugo's most patriotic poetry, fine as his strains may be in imagery and eloquence, lacks what constitutes the very soul and substance of political poetry—ideas. Even when the poet for a moment rises above the purely personal aspect of his subject and touches on its larger sides:

O drapeau de Wagram! ô pays de Voltaire!

(and would anyone but a rhetorician have selected those names in preference to far more august ones in French history?) there is such lack of largeness of view and solidity of conception that the poet soon has his customary recourse to declamation and escapes into mere metaphor.

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For example, Hugo accuses Louis Bonaparte of judicial assassination, a subject, surely, to inspire reflections of some solemnity and weight in a satiric poet bent on anticipating the verdict of the day of judgment and fairly confident in his own power to formulate a decision that shall be gratefully sustained on that supreme occasion. What then has the poet to say? He tells us that he fled from town and wandered into the fields, and that even here he found the very flowers irritating and saw rolling in the sky what seemed to be not the moon but a bloody and dissevered head. And here the poem ends. As for reflections—nil!

In this manner, the element of permanent historic interest in the "Châtiments" is reduced to something parochial and personal. We are throughout most impertinently made witnesses to the one-sided and voluminous quarrel of Victor Hugo *against* Napoleon III, of an ill-natured poet attacking a good-natured despot. And it is the poet who usurps the whole foreground. The profound and bitter sorrowing of the patriot who forgets himself in bewailing the shame and the misery of his country, this manly and noble sadness does not hover over the work. It is quite merged and lost in the fierce and rancorous hate that chiefly inspires the poet's utterance, and that makes him write a poem in the same spirit as Locusta compounded a poison. The tone is not noble. A propitious exile had placed the poet on a pedestal high above his enemies. When he is thoroughly possessed by the frenzy of satiric song, he forgets this advantage and furiously leaps down and puts himself on a level with the worst of them in order to insult them more at ease and more audibly. Why did he not comprehend that, even as an attitude, it would in the long run have redounded more to his glory to pose solely as a grief-stricken patriot draped in austere sorrow and talking—not too often—with severe but restrained gravity of his own personal concern for these large issues?

L'exemple froid vaut mieux qu'un éclair de fureur.

Why did he not find in his taste, if not in his heart, the sagacity which might have led him to square his utterance, if not his conduct, with the programme which he so melodiously outlined in one of the finest of all the "Châtiments?"

Je t'aime, exil; douleur, je t'aime!  
Tristesse, sois mon diadème!

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Je t'aime, altière pauvreté!  
J'aime ma porte aux vents battue,  
J'aime le deuil, grave statue,  
Qui vient s'asseoir à mon côté.

Would not that be more permanently satisfying than to depict his  
enemies as

Gros mandarins chinois adorant le Tartare,—  
Ils apportent leur cœur, leur vertu, leur catarrhe,  
Et prosternent, cagneux, devant sa majesté,  
Leur bassesse avachie en imbécillité?



## CHAPTER VII

### THE EPIC POET

Cours sans repos, pense aux donjons,  
Pense aux murs hauts de cent coudées,  
Franchis, sans brouter les bourgeons,  
La forêt-vierge des idées.  
Ne t'attarde pas, même au beau.

V. Hugo.

**D**URING the ten years preceding the usurpation of Napoleon III, Hugo's political aspirations had reduced his Muse to silence—during the twenty years that followed, it was only too often his political disappointments that spurred him to utterance. This attitude of disaffection was not exactly a new one. The constant opposition of base and tyrannical kings to worthy and heroic vassals and commoners in his plays proceeded from a similar tribute to the political temper of the hour, largely reënforced by the rancor inspired in the poet by his difficulties with the dramatic censorship.

After the *coup d'état* Hugo's animosity had found expression in both prose and verse, in "Napoléon le Petit" and in "Les Châtiments." But these represent only the first explosions of his wrath. The smouldering embers, though wisely turned to account for the more leisurely *cuisine* of other poetic delicacies, were still from time to time fanned into a livelier blaze for the incineration of some under-done or left-over limb of Napoleon III or his retinue. These igneous aftermaths fill most of the two volumes of the "Quatre Vents de l'Esprit," which do little more than re-echo what the poet had already said with more power and virtuosity in the "Châtiments." Hugo was at once too good a romanticist ever to forget himself and too good a hater ever to forget his enemies. His other poetry during this twenty year period, whatever may be its ostensible subject, is nearly always colored by a secret desire to be disagreeable to Napoleon III, who had exiled the poet, to Pius IX, who had blessed the Emperor, and to anybody else who was a servitor of either the imperial state or the Catholic church.

In the "Légende" the inspiration of the past and that of the present are incongruously intertwined. Hugo is here carrying stones for the building of a mighty monument, but whenever the stone seems

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particularly pointed or jagged he forgets his purpose and yields to the temptation to hurl it at his enemies. At one moment he transports us far from the bondage of the passing hour into the enchanted world of poetry; the next minute he sharply brings us back to reality and sets us down on the floor of the Chamber of Deputies to listen to a philippic inspired by the latest turn of contemporary politics. He had passed ten years in training himself for the parliamentary arena. The Second Empire had interrupted him eloquently open-mouthed and sublimely gesticulant. He was unwilling to lose his speech and his gesture. He continued both in his successive volumes of verse. He had seemed too much a poet in parliament; he now seems too much a parliamentarian in poetry. Instead of a disinterested interpreter of the true and the beautiful, we see

L'effrayant avoyer Gundoldingen cassant  
Sur César le sapin des Alpes teint de sang.

If he describes a toad covered with pustules, it is his rancor, rather than his rhyming dictionary, that furnishes the far-fetched conclusion of the couplet:

Hélas! le bas-empire est couvert d'Augustules.

That is a paving-stone flung into the garden of Napoleon III. Read on a few lines and you have a second stone, thrown, this time, into the garden of the Vatican.

Un homme qui passait vit la hideuse bête,  
Et frémissant, lui mit un talon sur la tête;  
C'était un prêtre ayant un livre qu'il lisait.

Evidently Hugo is now doing penance for his good bishop Myriel, who sprained his ankle in order not to step on an ant.

This tendency is so plainly manifest in the "Légende" that I find it impossible to agree with Brunetière, who asserts that Hugo, here and in "Les Misérables," has changed his manner, and become epically objective. Is Hugo objective when he makes his old marquiss say:

Oh! sois maudit, maudit, maudit, et sois maudit,  
Ratbert, empereur, roi, César, escroc, bandit!  
O grand vainqueur d'enfants de cinq ans! maudits soient  
Les pas que font tes pieds, les jours que tes yeux voient,  
Et la gueuse qui t'offre en riant son sein nu!  
. . . Dieu, témoin des deuils et des horreurs,  
Laisse sous le ciel noir vivre les empereurs!

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Is he objective when he makes the Alpine eagle read prolix anti-military lectures to the Swiss mercenaries—lectures only too plainly meant for home-consumption among the soldiers of Napoleon III? To a truly objective poet the military virtues of which the lion of Lucerne is the tragic symbol might have seemed not wholly unworthy of a place in the “Légende.” But the lion of Lucerne has the taint of royalism! The spirit that dictated the “Châtiments” is still operative, though the poet has turned away from the present toward the past:

Dressons maintenant  
Assez de piloris pour faire une épopée!

That is the underlying mood.

Hugo says of the “Légende”: “This is history learned by eaves-dropping at the door of legend.” That is very prettily said—only we must not forget that the eaves-dropper who listens at the key-hole is not in the most auspicious position for hearing plainly; and, if his secret purpose be to learn something discreditable concerning those whom he overhears, his report may well be received with caution. It is only when he hears a quarrel going on behind the door, or when he suspects that a dark plot is being hatched there, that Hugo is drawn to the key-hole.

In this not very judicial attitude, he conceives a series of pictures of the past, which are meant to serve as a mirror to reflect the ugly present. The “Légende” is not at all a panorama illustrating man’s progress through the ages, the darkness gradually yielding to an illumination that seems more and more certainly to announce that millennial dawn which Hugo so incessantly hailed. On the contrary, we find, projected on the poet’s screen, in an unvarying sequence, the gloomiest shadows and the most hideous actions,

Tresoune and envye,  
Poysoune, manslaughter & mordre in sondry wyse,

all the arch-deeds of piteous massacre that have disgraced and defeated human progress at every turn:

Sur des tas de femmes mortes  
Des tas d’enfants éventrés.

And these actions are regularly performed by kings and sanctioned by priests, and when opposed, are opposed by commoners, or by chivalric heroes, all *extrême gauche* in their opinions, who display a

special gift of eloquence in denouncing kings and priests. For Hugo, as Jules Lemaitre says, "history is the struggle of sublime beggars and decorative old men with long beards against atrocious kings and hideous priests." There is not a hint of even the most elementary conception of the rôle which royalty has played, or of the necessities on which the institution was based, or of its logical place in the development of mankind. And yet, an occasional king,

Un roi, fût-il nain, fût-il un pauvre hère,  
Hydropique, goîtreux, perclus, tortu, fourbu, . . .  
Eût-il morve et farcin, rachis, goutte et gravelle,

has surely now and then been animated by good intentions, and has even at times, thanks to his power and position, been able to remove some of the stumbling-blocks that barred the path of progress. A line of kings is not absolutely identical with the Rogues' gallery, nor is the difference, when it exists, uniformly in favor of the latter.

A similar criticism may be made on Hugo's treatment of the Church. The ecclesiastics in the past did not spend all their time in devoutly planning murders or in administering sacraments and absolution to royal but low-lived assassins, such as inspire Hugo's indignant outcry:

Vos gloires ne font pas reculer les évêques,  
Mais vos cadavres font reculer l'embaumeur.

Hugo has almost suppressed, through anti-clerical rancor,

La légende des saints, seul et vrai panthéon.

He has substituted *la légende des scélérats*:<sup>1</sup>

His native predilection for the horrible and the melodramatic, of course, contributed to darken the picture. So this "Paradisaal trans-

<sup>1</sup> If Hugo has anywhere written the epic of "progress" it is not in the "Légende"—it is in the "Contemplations":

Surgis, Volta! dompte en ton aire  
Les Fluides, noir phlégéton!  
Viens, Franklin! voici le Tonnerre.  
Le Flot gronde; parais, Fulton!  
Rousseau! prends corps à corps la Haine.  
L'Esclavage agite sa chaîne;  
O Voltaire! aide au paria!  
La Grève rit, Tyburn flamboie,  
L'affreux chien Montfaucon aboie,  
On meurt . . . Debout! Beccaria!



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figuration of the terrestrial inferno" pictures the Inferno in 99 cantos, and then, without warning, thrusts Paradise upon us in the 100th—labeled, with a not altogether happy stroke of prophecy, "Twentieth Century." The "Légende" is mainly a protracted nightmare vision of the torture-chambers of history, of red-handed kings and black-hearted priests, of the track of the tiger crossed by the trail of the serpent. It is a renewal of the unintelligent criticism directed by Rousseau against the historic evolution of mankind. Progress, for Hugo, has been retarded—nay, postponed—

A cause des brigands et de vous autres rois

till 1789, when the French Revolution, that sudden blaze of light, rends the immemorial darkness. And even this momentary vision of Paradise has been eclipsed by the recurrent clouds conjured into being by the imperial church and state to veil the Revolutionary skies—the drama of human progress, it would seem, being enacted pretty exclusively on French soil.

Even the crimes of the Revolution are, for Hugo, a product of the past, a final sin by proxy of expiring royalty, committed by hypnotized virtue. As a result of this reversal of the glass through which it is viewed, the past is systematically dwarfed. Greece, Rome, the Crusades, the Reformation, the Renaissance are as good as absent. Is it the paganism of the Renaissance, so artistic and epicurean, that is represented in *Le Satyre*, or is it not rather the paganism of the age of Deucalion and Pyrrha? The Church, the monk, and the priest appear to have made no contribution whatever to human progress (except the Inquisition); the great figures in the annals of thought, the philosophers, the poets, the artists, are missing; the great moments in the history of thought are almost obliterated in this record. The "Légende" is not the history but the necrology of progress:

La somme  
De tous les combattants que le progrès consomme  
Étonne le sépulcre et fait rêver la mort.

All this perversion of history becomes the more irritating when we reflect that it is not opinions formed and held during long years that are voiced here, but only those tardily generated in the quinquagenarian poet out of his boiling wrath against an imperial despot whom he had himself done as much as any man to bring into power. The "Légende" is, almost in the same degree as the "Châtiments," a

monument to Hugo's rancor. It is the defects of his character quite as much as those of his genius that have marred his work, and have made him as unwilling as he was perhaps unable to interpret or even understand the Christianity of the Middle Ages or the growth of the national spirit in modern Europe—two great facts which were of the very essence of his subject. To sacrifice the past out of ill-humor with the present is obviously, for the singer of progress, a fatal error. "Smiling pictures are rare in this book," says Hugo truthfully. "That is because they are not frequent in history." Whether this be true or not matters little here; nothing could be plainer than the fact that the brief moments when Clio smiles are precisely those which she sanctions as pertinent to the shining story of progress. Hugo perversely insists on those moments in which the Muse of History veils her face with horror, and he loudly invokes Calliope in her stead to be propitious to his epic song.

If then we renounce the "Légende" as history, may we not accept it as epic? The French critics almost unanimously authorize us to do so, and insist that in Hugo they have at last that long wished for *merle blanc*, a great French epic poet. Faguet finds Victor Hugo "as an epic poet infinitely superior to Victor Hugo as a lyric poet—although his age failed to perceive it."

On examining the manner of the "Légende" it will be evident at once that it is the primitive and popular epic, not its later literary successor, that Hugo has hovering before his mind's eye as a model, or rather as a suggestion. It is Homer, rather than Virgil, that he is vaguely willing to resemble—but it is Homer seen through a veil of distorting medievalism and romanticism—Homer, no longer Hellenic and human, but looming supernatural and crudely godlike, a Homer primitive, uncurbed, and romantically defiant of all those laws of good sense and good taste which the real Homer so felicitously illustrates at every turn. Hugo has not caught the epic tone of Homer; he has caught, without their redeeming simplicity and naïveté, the tasteless exaggeration of the medieval *Chansons de geste*. These models hover ambiguously between what is truly and worthily epic and what is often only grotesquely pseudo-epic, and so also do Hugo's *petites épopées*.

Despite the genuine primitive vein that unquestionably subsists under all Hugo's artistic refinements, he nevertheless does not conceive his heroes with that simple grandeur which is epic only because it remains at the same time human and convincing. Like all his

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personages they have a stage stride; they move in an atmosphere of melodrama and masquerade. They neither descend to the familiar appeal of reality nor rise to the superior dignity of poetry. Here, as in Hugo's plays, the personages that flit across his stage are quite unreal; they are tapestry heroes and heroines, stiffly attitudinizing in grandiose poses, amid beautifully embroidered and gorgeously colored landscapes and under very sumptuous and elaborately wrought skies. Here, as in the plays, they stand out in the boldest relief, because the good are worked in with the whitest of wool and the bad with the blackest. The heroes are all first cousins to Jack the Giant-Killer, and the villains are all blood relations of Bluebeard. The bad people

Feraient rougir Satan.  
Ce qu'ils font est néant et cendre; une hydre allaite  
Dans leur âme nocturne et profonde un squelette.

The good people are all like Eviradnus,

De sa vie il n'a fait action qui ne fût  
Sainte, blanche et loyale,

or like the marquis in *Ratbert*,

Il n'a pas un remords et pas un repentir;  
Après quatre-vingts ans, son âme est toute blanche.

The more militant among the good wander about the world as professional avengers, swooping down like a sudden Nemesis upon the wicked in their moments of triumph—and usually adding to the torments they are about to inflict on them an eloquent tirade in a hundred verses, after which vice is punished and virtue rewarded—though often Hugo brings in the avenger only after the piteous death of the victim.

Hugo seems at once to have lived a thousand years before Homer and some twenty-seven centuries after him; his people are done in such simple black and white that they seem to belong to the childhood of the world; and they are so much like Hugo in their self-conscious poses and in their rhetorical and humanitarian justification of their strange conduct that they seem to belong to the days of the Fourierists. They are at the same time ultra-primitive, and transparently sophisticated. The poet's primitivism is too much intertangled with mannerism and affectation. It has, however, its genuine side and shines out in occasional poems, especially in a few of his Biblical idyls, which are as

persuasively beautiful as the Bible itself. This same primitive charm is also aboundingly apparent in felicities of detail strewn all along the pathway of the "Légende," varying from random similes of a truly Homeric beauty and freshness to occasional touches of almost Miltonic sublimity.

As in his dramatic work, so here the poet's genius triumphs not in the essentials but in the ornamentation of his themes. He has plied style, imagery and description to the utmost, and as all his critics observe, never were these features in his work so brilliant as in the "Légende." They shine—perhaps even with their maximum of brilliancy—in many an utterly improbable tale dealing with utterly impossible heroes.

In a few of the poems where the theme is such as to yield gracefully to this ornamentation and to allow itself to be imbedded in this luxuriance, Hugo achieves some of his supreme successes. *Booç Endormi* is an Oriental landscape steeped in the radiance of a moonlit night and giving the brooding sense of a divine mystery and peace laying its spell on man and nature.

Un frais parfum sortait des touffes d'asphodèle;  
Les souffles de la nuit flottaient sur Galgala.

L'ombre était nuptiale, auguste et solennelle.

These lines sum up the mood that pervades the whole idyl. This is not the less admirable because this effect is in the main achieved by Hugo's pictorial method. It is true, this renders the poem religiously suggestive rather than religiously significant. The treatment is romantic, and, like pretty much all romantic treatment of religious things, is essentially external. Nevertheless, it is here of extraordinary beauty, because the purely romantic means that Hugo uses represent what is the most novel and striking charm of an art in revolt against the rationalism of the classics, that is, its magical power of momentarily naturalizing the spirit in the dim region where nature, imaginatively seen, seems to hint at something above or beyond itself. It is in this region of mystery that half of what constitutes religious sentiment and even theologic conceptions has its ultimate origins. In a serious nature, the mood begotten here is transformed into religion. In a nature lacking inwardness, and such most decidedly Hugo's was, it remains pure poetry; but in this case, and in a few others as well, the poetry is consummate poetry. Such poetry, however, is necessarily at the farthest remove from actuality, and



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its glamour, when closely scrutinized is seen to be made up of splendid romantic detail.

But, if we are looking, not for splendid romantic detail, but for genuine epic strains dealing with grand things grandly, yet naturally, what do we find in Hugo's "Légende"? Do we find the gift of the truly epic poet, that of seeing with creative insight, under the familiar and accepted forms of humanity and nature, the larger and sublimer lines in which the divine models after which they were shaped stand revealed? Or do we find only the superb gift of the rhetorician and the painter who has a singular and almost unique genius for transposing on the most colossal scale into sounding words and brilliant images the data which the world around him furnishes,—so brilliant that the intensity, the variety and the prolongation of the verbal music and the gorgeous visions produce a specious though wofully intermittent sensation of superhuman grandeur and power? The epic, though it may and even must move farther than any other kind of poetry beyond the boundaries of everyday life, must nevertheless remain within hailing distance. Hugo neglects this law and multiplies the interval of separation indefinitely. He finds the realm of the epic too narrow for his genius and goes away beyond it—into that of Brobdingnag.

Although the "Légende" unquestionably contains some of his finest work, it nevertheless seems strange that the critics, who have been unanimous in seeing here the high points of his later manner, have quite failed to note the very striking evidences of decadence which abound here, of declining sanity, of a more and more unnatural abandonment to caprice and lawlessness. The gain in poetic power is compensated by a corresponding loss in taste, in poetic soundness.

This is especially apparent in the style. It is at once superior and inferior to that of the earlier poems. More brilliant and imaginative, it is also far more uneven. It continually sacrifices truth to force. It no longer knows anything of timidity or scruples. For one happy accent of heroism like Aymerillot's couplet

Deux liards couvriraient fort bien toutes mes terres,  
Mais tout le grand ciel bleu n'emplirait pas mon cœur,

we have to endure dozens of false notes like

On voudrait balayer son ombre du pavé,

or like this:

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Tiphaine est dans sa tour que protège un fossé,  
Debout, les bras croisés, sur la haute muraille,  
Voilà longtemps qu'il n'a tué quelqu'un, il bâille,

or like

Cela se dit pendant que les gueux, pêle-mêle,  
Boivent l'ombre et le rêve à l'obscur mamelle  
Du sommeil ténébreux et muet.

The *Parricide* is one of the most admired of these epical poems, and it is not without considerable imaginative power, though surely of a somewhat questionable legitimacy. At any rate, it has enough crude realistic force to give the reader a very genuine shudder—and that is exactly what the poet aimed at. But how absurdly he breaks the spell from time to time by the intrusion of puerile devices and gratuitous prowess of style. Canute finds his father asleep unguarded,

Il le tua, disant: "Lui-même n'en sait rien!"  
Puis il fut un grand roi.

Rien que dans un hiver ce chasseur détruisit  
Trois dragons en Ecosse, et deux rois en Scanie.

What an unscrupulous sacrifice to theatrical effect!

At other times the style is coldly manneristic, notably in most of the poems that deal with Biblical and Islamite subjects. The death of Mohammed is typical:

Et l'ange de la mort vers le soir à la porte  
Apparut, demandant qu'on lui permit d'entrer.  
"Qu'il entre!" On vit alors son regard s'éclairer  
De la même clarté qu'au jour de sa naissance;  
Et l'ange lui dit: "Dieu désire ta présence."  
"Bien," dit-il. Un frisson sur ses tempes courut.  
Un souffle ouvrit sa lèvre, et Mahomet mourut.

Such simplicity does not ring true.

Hugo's luxuriance is often detrimental to the theme despite his virtuosity in the use of ornamental accessories. What a contrast between a Homeric description, in which there are usually only two or three rapid strokes, the picturesque detail being carried along like a scintillating bubble on the current of the narrative, and a Hugoesque description, brilliant, variegated and very much alive, but far too insistent and *tapageuse*. It is an infallible sign of the dominance of a lyrical and oratorical temperament, as opposed to an epic one, to be thus carried away by enthusiasm for mere detail to the prejudice of the underlying theme. Hugo is so far from living over again, except pictorially, the

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experiences of his heroes that he abandons them at every turn to look after the stage-setting, the costumes, and the properties. These are of a quite unexampled elaborateness and magnificence; but we are never quite sure that they help, and we are often painfully certain that they hinder, the action, which they interrupt and overflow. It is probable that in the "Légende" the number of descriptive verses far exceeds the number of narrative verses!

Unhappily the accessories of epic can not make an epic. Hugo's subjects, many of them trivial, others blood-curdling, and only a few truly elevated, usually lack the largeness and the dignity that should lift them above the mere narrative level, and the unevenness of treatment only makes this defect more salient. Hugo tries to impose a factitious unity on the "Légende" by invoking a historic continuity in the themes; but this we have seen to be futile. The narratives must stand or fall, each by its own merits. We have not got beyond "Hernani." The conception of his subject in each of Hugo's plays was trivial and even transparently puerile. This triviality is an index of a permanent quality characterizing his imagination. It is a fault which he vainly strove to overcome by perpetually resorting to the colossal and the limitless, both in the physical and in the metaphysical worlds. This defect and this equivocal device for obviating it force themselves upon us in the "Légende" perhaps even more markedly than in the plays. The subjects treated are often mere tales of the Bluebeard and the Monk Lewis order, deduced with a portentous gravity that would make Homer seem in comparison truly a smiling *bonhomme*. This varnish, though prodigally applied, only too readily peels off the ill-adapted materials. One can not wed, still less can one alternate, the manner of Ariosto with that of Homer,—even of Homer seen through Gallic spectacles. And to bring in Baron Munchausen as a third model is really fatal! Hugo, like Corneille, can not persuade himself that heroism is in nature; he locates it outside. The poet's pipe,—no, I mean his clarion,—is used as a tube through which he insufflates his heroes until they swell perilously near to the bursting point with epic bigness. The manner rides far over the line that separates grandeur from grandiloquence, and we get the time-honored Furioso in a new avatar:

Alors, levant la tête,  
Se dressant tout debout sur ses grands étriers,  
Tirant sa large épée aux éclairs meurtriers,  
Avec un âpre accent plein de sourdes huées,

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Pâle, effrayant, pareil à l'aigle des nuées,  
Terrassant du regard son camp épouvanté,  
L'invincible empereur s'écria: "Lâcheté!"

This superb bombast is followed by a speech in the same exalted vein of fustian, fitly closing with the comment:

Ainsi Charles de France, appelé Charlemagne,  
Exarque de Ravenne, empereur d'Allemagne,  
Parlait dans la montagne avec sa grande voix;  
Et les pâtres lointains, épars au fond des bois,  
Croyaient en l'entendant que c'était le tonnerre.

Hugo was in very truth, as Lemaître has said, *un Espagnol retentissant*, *un Lucain*—a Lucan and not a Homer. Yet *Aymerillot* is invariably set down without reservations by Hugo's admirers as an epic gem. Quite in the same vein is the treatment of the beggar (more eloquent than tidy) in *Le jour des rois*.

Alors, tragique et se dressant,

(Homer's heroes merely stand up, under ordinary provocation; Hugo's always straighten up, with a majestic jerk like a piston-cornet drawn out for the high notes),

Le mendiant, tendant ses deux mains décharnées,  
Montra sa souquenille immonde aux Pyrénées,  
Et cria dans l'abîme et dans l'immensité:  
"Confrontez-vous. Sentez votre fraternité,  
O mont superbe, ô loque infâme! neige, boue!  
Comparez, sous le vent des cieus qui les secoue,  
Toi, tes nuages noirs, toi, tes haillons hideux,  
O guenille, ô montagne; et cachez toutes deux,  
Pendant que les vivants se traînent sur leurs ventres,  
Toi, les poux dans tes trous, toi, les rois dans tes antres!"

Not only do his heroes invariably come upon the scene with a stage-stride, even the separate parts and parcels of their anatomy have distinct theatrical values. Every tonsorial artist, if not, haply, every lover of epic artistry, will view with unmixed admiration the startling apparition of the beard of Eviradnus:

Comme sort de la brume  
Un sévère sapin, vieilli dans l'Appenzell,  
A l'heure où le matin au souffle universel  
Passe, des bois profonds balayant la lisière,  
Le preux ouvre son casque, et hors de la visière  
Sa longue barbe blanche et tranquille apparaît.

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Was ever beard ushered into view with more imperial magnificence?

Hugo tries conscientiously to give to people and things this air of mystery and legendary largeness—in the latter respect not without success. Eviradnus, the aged but tireless champion of right against wrong, is seven feet high—and can open the gates of an inhospitable city with his fist, trample a ducal monument to pieces under his heel, and carry off the marble column thereunto appertaining all the way from Strasburg to Wasselonne—many miles!

Yet Eviradnus is but a pigmy compared with the wicked Rostabat (of the *Petit roi de Galice*), who must have moved about with some discomfort amid the architecture of the Spain of the dark ages—for he (if arithmetic be a science) is not less than twelve feet tall! Garin, too, is not less remarkable,

Garin, qui se trouvant un beau jour à Venise,  
Emporta sur son dos le lion de Saint-Marc.

But, as so often happens in Hugo, man must yield to the animal. There was a lion which dwelt near a great primeval city,

Or ce lion était gêné par cette ville,

and so ate up the city gate with its triple bars—and, it seems, the city and all its inhabitants besides! Even this lion must in his turn give way before the Satyr—

Et des peuples errants demandaient leur chemin,  
Perdus au carrefour des cinq doigts de sa main.

This air of mystery and legendary largeness is kept up through the entire poem *Les Lions*. Here this pseudo-epic varnish is applied with faultless unity of tint, and reality is so skillfully excluded that it does not intrude for a single instant to disturb the illusion of perfectly achieved falsity. But such supreme artistic triumphs are as rare in Hugo as they are in Mother Goose and other highly imaginative writers who have essayed the arduous task of dealing with realistic phenomena in a poetical spirit. Nearly everywhere we have the tasteless and mechanical mixing of elements that refuse to combine, of pretentious gravity cheek by jowl with pretended lightness. We have uncanny visions of epical cows jumping over epical moons amid the mad gyrations of we know not what gigantic fiddlesticks. It is only too clear that the epic strain is here a sophisticated latter-

day product, not proceeding from a spirit that moves with native dignity and ease among noble actions and heroic beings, but from an over-worked imagination laboring by dint of artifice to inflate style and ideas to a greatness that is nowise natural to it, and relapsing at every turn into the very commonness that it is trying so hard to elude—and which, unhappily, is natural to it. Nearly every one of the longer poems provokes the unfortunate query: "Is this epic or burlesque?" Hugo has confounded the two through love of contrast and variety. He holds to his old theories of the "Préface de Cromwell," the mingling of the grotesque with the sublime—and too often, when dealing in the former article, he gravely declares to us that he makes an exclusive specialty of the latter. He passes with solemn stride from grave to gay, and with hop, skip and jump from the trivial to the sublime. He has not even followed the best models offered by the old *chansons de geste*. The rude simplicity and grandeur of the "Chanson de Roland," a song endued with the most genuinely heroic spirit, might, if transfigured by a modern artist, give us a really Homeric impression. But Hugo seems to have transplanted from the serious medieval epic only its barbaric tone, and its crude exaggerations; his real models would almost seem to have been the burlesque epics, such poems as the *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne à Jérusalem*. *Aymerillot*, for instance, is a very amusing and sprightly bit of narrative, very pleasing even, if taken only as a burlesque of the epic manner; but Hugo apparently meant it to affect us both as epic and as burlesque. The amusing side of the poem, which in his version is really the substance, was intended by him for the seasoning. He meant the effect to be genuinely epic—and it is not genuinely epic. He has lowered the tone far too much for that. We are not in the world of Hector and Achilles, we are in that of Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida." "Of all the heroes of the Homeric epic," says Brunetière, "Hugo never cared for any except Thersites, the *Ursus* or the *Quasimodo* of the Trojan war."

Narbonne est belle, dit le roi,  
Et je l'aurai; je n'ai jamais vu, sur ma foi,  
Ces belles filles-là sans leur rire au passage,  
Et me piquer un peu les doigts à leur corsage.

That is to make Brutus *dameret* and to sink the great Charlemagne.

Charles, plus rayonnant que l'archange céleste,

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in Charles-Quint—as we find him flirting in “Hernani.” In passing from the medieval to the modern version, the king loses his dignity in transit, for this *gaulois* color is mainly Hugo’s invention—the original is at least serious.

Let us take another not less admired example: *Le Mariage de Roland*. As a bit of burlesque epic in the manner of Ariosto, it too is highly amusing. But the medieval model aimed at serious effects. Hugo once more tries to be at once burlesque and serious. Roland and Oliver fight:

L’archange Saint Michel attaquant Apollo  
Ne ferait pas un choc plus étrange et plus sombre.

That is intended seriously. Oliver is disarmed:

L’enfant songe à son père et se tourne vers Dieu.

That is dignified and not un-Homeric.

Le voyageur s’effraye et croit voir dans la brume  
D’étranges bûcherons qui travaillent la nuit.

That is a touch truly Homeric. The combat continues:

Le jour naît, le combat continue à grand bruit;  
La pâle nuit revient, ils combattent; l’aurore  
Reparaît dans les cieux, ils combattent encore.  
Nul repos. Seulement, vers le troisième soir,  
Sous un arbre, en causant, ils sont allés s’asseoir;  
Puis ont recommencé.

That is Hugoesque—it can only be read with a smile—and the wary reader will suspect, what is true, that the artless exaggeration of the medieval model has been absurdly swelled to the colossal.

O chocs affreux! terreur! tumulte étincelant!

cries the laboring poet when the fifth night approaches and the two heroes, swordless now, are plucking up oaks and elms respectively to use as weapons. Hugo has turned from Homer to Ariosto, but he has done so in all seriousness. Can the reader do likewise? The dénouement is quite as absurdly wrought. Oliver cries:

Roland, nous n’en finirons point. . . .  
Ne vaudrait-il pas mieux que nous devinssions frères?  
Ecoute, j’ai ma sœur, la belle Aude aux bras blancs,  
Epouse-la.

—Pardieu! je veux bien, dit Roland.  
Et maintenant buvons . . .

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It is in vain that Hugo's admirers tell us that all this is epic. If it were, the age of Homer must yield the palm to the age of Louis XIV.

Je chante le vainqueur des vainqueurs de la terre!

It was Scudéry, not Homer, who raised epic to this lofty height. Hugo has raised it even higher and has out-soared Scudéry himself.

La lourdeur de cette ombre étonne le pavé!

Assuredly, though a poet who writes in this vein may astonish the natives, the foreign reader is likely to suspect that only a nation in dire distress at the epic lacuna in its literature could hail such a singer as a second Homer.

The narrative, like the plot in Hugo's plays, is governed by the histrionic ideal. At every turn we find—amid a profusion of picturesque lyricism—antithetic contrasts, violent situations, sinister villainy, duels and murders, stagey heroism, magniloquent tirades, sepulchral vast gloomy castles, trap-doors and bottomless abysses, horrors, super-human or diabolic personages, picturesque disguises put on and thrown off with a marvelous instinct of melodramaturgy, in short, all the stage-properties of the masked ball, or of the Dumas or Hugo play, along with its rhetoric and its startling mannerism.

Le chevalier leva lentement sa visière:  
"Je m'appelle Roland, pair de France," dit il.

Does a baby, sprung from a heroic cavalier, toddle?

Il étonnait les monts où l'éclair retentit  
Par la grandeur des pas qu'il faisait tout petit.

Does the Sultan Mourad drive away a swarm of flies?

Et de ce même geste énorme et surhumain  
Dont il chassait les rois, Mourad chassa les mouches.

Are we to be impressed with the heroic greatness of the Cid? He is made *inabordable*:

Nul n'était au-dessus du Cid, et nul auprès;  
Personne, eût-il été de la royale estrade,  
Prince, infant, n'eût osé vous dire: Camarade!

Does the bandit Masferrer find himself barred by a ravine?

S'il veut un pont, il ploie un arbre sur le trou.  
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Do a hundred and twenty armed men (including the twelve-foot giant, Rostabat) attack the Cid? He modestly but firmly defies them:

Vous êtes cent contre un! Pardieu! le bel effroi!  
Fils, cent maravédís valent-ils une piastre?  
Cent lampions sont-ils plus farouches qu'un astre?  
Combien de poux faut-il pour manger un lion?

Nay, these Cyranian gentlemen of the road are in Hugo's pages so terrible that nature itself does not feel safe in their presence.

Jayme parfois se montre aux ouragans terrible;  
Il se dresse entre deux nuages entr'ouverts,  
Il regarde la foudre et l'autan de travers,  
Et fronce un tel sourcil que l'ombre est inquiète.

Truly, the heroes of the "Légende", these *chercheurs d'aventures sublimes*, are epic in much the same manner and degree as the Matamores and the Captain Bobadils of comedy. They strut and swagger, they brag and prate and pose and bump the stars with their foreheads, and conduct themselves with such complete observance of all the rules of the mock-heroic burlesque that, should some future Aristotle wish to write its *ars poetica*, he will need no source but this. They are as theatrical in speech as they are sensational in action. Sometimes they indulge in long tirades, at other times they confine themselves to a pregnant and sententious brevity, and close and open their mouths with a metallic click.

Soudain il voit venir l'écuyer qu'il préfère,  
Bernard, un bon archer qui sait lire, et Bernard  
Dit:—Milord, préparez la hache et le poignard.  
Un seigneur vous écrit.—Quel est ce seigneur?—Sire,  
C'est Jacques, lord d'Angus—Soit. Qu'est-ce qu'il désire?  
—Vous tuer.—Réponds-lui que c'est bien.

But if these heroes seem a little stiff, the gods, at any rate, know how to unbend and be more human than their ancient models. In the *Satyre* we find them assembled in sublime and sovereign congress, the poet tells us, but as an honest and impartial chronicler he presently informs us how they conducted themselves:

Mars embrassa Minerve,  
Mercure prit la taille à Bellone,

while Pluto says things which shock even Momus, and Hebe hides Juno

Pour que la reine pût se tordre en liberté.

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The Greek Olympus, as conceived by Hugo, evidently had a Latin Quarter. The poet had doubtless heard of the Homeric laughter of the gods, and, it would seem, did not borrow a copy of the Iliad to learn what it was.

The marvelous and the supernatural elements are far more profuse in these modern epics than in any of the older ones. Hugo did not perceive that the modern poet is bound to use them more sparingly. His imaginative gift, peculiarly strong in this direction, seduces him. The atmosphere of the ghostly world of unreality, its unnamable horror and its clammy thrills, he can evoke as no other poet, perhaps, has done. But he abuses his strength, and does consciously and of set purpose what he should do with a show of convincing naturalness.

His use of the marvelous, therefore, like all the epic elements in these poems, is now legitimate and now illegitimate. The effect is often powerful, the mysterious forces that he sees vaguely circulating under the passive mask of nature are stirred to life at his potent conjurations, and we have the sensation and the shudder of contact with the phantasmal world that invisibly hovers above and below the thin surface of things that our senses disport on so blindly. But nearly always these incarnations of the wild and weird gratuitously rend the spell of illusion by doing or saying something so unsupernatural and so Hugoesque that we incontinently guess their provenience. We recognize them as the authentic manufacture of a fantastically imaginative gentleman, who for a long time lived, not without profit, almost within stone's throw of the *Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin*, where the stage-carpenter and the property-man between them have mastered the mechanism of the horripilating, the ghostly, and the ghastly, to a degree that might well make all mere literary craftsmen in horrors (except Hugo) blush at their own piteous performance.

Hugo's story fluctuates giddily, now moving with persuasive power in these strange regions, in which his genius is really so much at home, now descending with plunging precipitancy to the level of the nursery tale. The marvelous element here is not, like that of the Greeks, drawn from a fund of immemorial legend, steeped in superstitious naturalism and irradiated by a solemn background of religion. Hugo melodramatizes the supernatural; Homer simply takes it for granted. In Hugo it seems not only factitious but often violent; in Homer it is always spontaneous, and of a charming naturalness. When the wicked tyrant Ratbert is slain, one sees

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Dans les profondeurs par les vents remuées,  
Un archange essuyer son épée aux nuées.

In the presence of such an archangelic swashbuckler, one is tempted to parody Pascal's dictum and to say: Qui veut faire l'archange fait l'archibête. Here, as everywhere, Hugo spoils his fine native gift through his unwillingness to recognize any limits. In *Le Parricide*, the wandering ghost of the assassin, King Canute, asks Mount Savo for a shroud of snow.

Le mont le reconnut et n'osa refuser.

Have we not already clearly crossed the borderland of fantasticality?

Il coupa de la neige et s'en fit un suaire;  
Puis il cria: "Vieux mont, la mort éclaire peu;  
De quel côté faut-il aller pour trouver Dieu?"  
Le mont au flanc difforme, aux gorges obstruées,  
Noir, triste, dans le vol éternel des nuées,  
Lui dit: "Je ne sais pas, spectre; je suis ici."

Are we not now hopelessly lost in a fog of fantasticality?

Just as humanity at this giddy height becomes either godlike or demonic, so animality is, in its turn, humanized. The horses that stalk through these epics prove that they have been quietly following the procession of events by the interjection in critical moments of remarks characterized by a fine concision and an equine sapience that we vainly seek in their masters. When Charlemagne tries fruitlessly to rouse his knights to martial exploits,

Le bon cheval du roi frappait du pied la terre  
Comme s'il comprenait.

And when a young prince kneels in prayer, the pious horse of Roland, profoundly edified, without a word of warning becomes vocal and breaks out into a brief but eloquent expression of approbation:

Le cheval de Roland entendit ces paroles,  
Leva la tête et dit à l'enfant: "C'est bien, roi."

If any reader wishes for an ocular demonstration, as it were, of the line, or rather the gulf, that separates legitimate from spurious supernaturalism, let him turn to the speaking horses of Achilles, Balius and Xanthus of immortal brood, at the close of the nineteenth book of the *Iliad*.

To illustrate the pseudo-epic quality of Hugo's supernaturalism,

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from this excursion into Homeric epic let the reader come back—if he has the heart—to Hugo's modern resuscitation of it; let us turn for a moment to his *Eviradnus*.

Of the epic *Légendes* none, perhaps, has been more highly praised by the French critics; none is more characteristic. Hugo displays here all his imaginative pictorial splendor, his animation of manner, his technical mastery, his fascinating mingling of lyricism with a dramatically developed theme, his feeling for wild and romantic adventure and scenery—and also his inability to distinguish from what is truly epic a horripilating fairy-tale, and, after he has once committed himself to it, his equal inability to maintain either matter or style on such inferior level of dignity as might still be possible.

The style, to my mind at any rate, has a pervading false ring, a fee-fi-fo-fum quality. It borders on bombast—a less polite censor might say that it crossed the border. Take the description of the mysterious and gigantic hero:

On dirait qu'un morceau de cette ombre  
A pris forme et s'en est allé dans le bois sombre.  
. . . Il ne se plaint de rien, mais seulement il trouve  
Que les hommes sont bas, et que les lits sont courts.  
. . . Il est toujours en marche, attendu qu'on moleste  
Bien des infortunés sous la voûte céleste.  
. . . Sa hache de bataille aisément se décroche;  
Malheur à l'action mauvaise qui s'approche  
Trop près d'Eviradnus, le champion d'acier!  
La mort tombe de lui comme l'eau du glacier.

Has any mortal, since Marlowe's pampered jades of Asia, so perfectly achieved the Ercles' vein? From these lofty heights, where he soars so far above the simple grandeur and naturalness of Homer or the circumspect elegance of Virgil, Hugo can descend, much farther than either of these great models ever pretended to do, into the region of the unadorned and friendly familiar:

—Frère, dit Joss, parlons politique à présent.  
La Mahaud dort et fait quelque rêve innocent;  
Nos griffes sont dessus. Nous avons cette folle.  
L'ami de dessous terre est sûr et tient parole.

Thersites nor Automedon nor Eumæus talk not thus, but even with this familiar and negligée garb do the Paris gamin and the faubourg workman drape their austere thought.

The cavalier Eviradnus is a "*chercheur d'aventures sublimes*." He undertakes (uncommissioned) to protect a young *marquise*, Mahaud,



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who spends a night in a haunted castle,—and a very terrible and monstrous place it is.

La lumière a l'air noire et la salle a l'air morte.  
La nuit retient son souffle. On dirait que la porte  
A peur de remuer tout haut ses deux battants.  
. . . Autour d'eux l'ombre a peur et les piliers ont froid.  
. . . Cette salle à manger de Titans est si haute,  
Qu'en égarant, de poutre en poutre, son regard  
Aux étages confus de ce plafond hagard,  
On est presque étonné de n'y pas voir d'étoiles.

To this scenically interesting but decidedly gruesome spot the *marquise* repairs, armed with a sleeping potion and chaperoned by a couple of strolling vagabonds, unknown to her. After suffering somewhat bold gallantries from these two gentlemen, she (perhaps a little indiscreetly) goes to sleep, begging them not to desert her. They do not. Now she needs the protection of Eviradnus. He is equal to the occasion: he has hidden himself in a suit of mail on horseback and hears the unedifying conversation of the two wicked vagabonds (who are, by the way, the King of Poland and the Emperor of Germany). They throw dice for the division of the spoils: one wins the lady's estates, the other the lady.

—Elle est belle, dit Joss.

—Pardieu!

—Qu'en vas-tu faire?

—Un cadavre.

The king's reason is that he loves her, as does his fellow-monarch, and this rivalry might lead to a quarrel.

Nous l'aimons. Tuons-la.

To avoid bloodshed, the assassin opens a trap-door through which he proposes to precipitate the *marquise*.

S'il sortait de ce puits une lueur de soufre,  
On dirait une bouche obscure de l'enfer.  
La trappe est large assez pour qu'en un brusque éclair  
L'homme étonné qu'on pousse y tombe à la renverse;  
On distingue les dents sinistres d'une herse,  
Et, plus bas, le regard flotte dans de la nuit;  
Le sang sur les parois fait un rougeâtre enduit;  
L'Epouvante est au fond de ce puits toute nue;  
On sent qu'il pourrit là de l'histoire inconnue;  
Et que ce vieux sépulcre, oublié maintenant,  
Cuve du meurtre, est plein de larves se traînant,  
D'ombres tâtant le mur, et de spectres reptiles.

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The two royal wretches are proceeding to throw their victim into this trap, when Eviradnus, descending from his equestrian perch, intervenes. In reply to the terrified exclamation:

Hein! qu'est-ce que c'est donc?

the spectral knight indulges in a tirade of something over a hundred lines, copiously sprinkled with such reproachful terms as *monstre*, *gueux*, *vermine*, *vautour*, *caïman*, *assassin*, *forban*, *vampire*, *roi*, *prince*, *empereur*, *césar*, and even *kayser*! He then, after the chivalric manner of Sir Philip Sidney, removes his armor so as to give his foes an equal chance. They show fight. He chokes one. The other filches his opponent's sword and thinks to overcome the unweaponed hero. He, however, uses the dead king's body as a club, and the Emperor of Germany, all the weight of royalty falling upon him, succumbs.

Si l'enfer s'éteignait, dans l'ombre universelle,  
On le rallumerait, certe, avec l'étincelle  
Qu'on peut tirer d'un roi heurtant un empereur.

The two wretches are flung into the trap by Eviradnus,

Et, calme, il dit tout bas, comme parlant en songe:  
—C'est bien! disparaissez, le tigre et le chacal!

Day dawns, the *marquise* awakes, and the chivalrous hero, approaching, says gently:

—Madame, avez-vous bien dormi?

and the curtain falls. But—no—this is not a drama:—let us not forget—it is an epic!

## CHAPTER VIII

### STYLE

A great author is not one who merely has a *copia verborum*, whether in prose or verse, and can, as it were, turn on at his will any number of splendid phrases and swelling sentences; but he is one who has something to say and knows how to say it.

CARDINAL NEWMAN

Je suis celui que rien n'arrête, celui qui va.

V. HUGO

Quoiqu'il ait fort peu de lecture,  
C'est un diable en écriture,  
En vers, prose et littérature.

OLD POET

Tout le secret du caractère et du talent de Juvénal est dans cette phrase de sa courte biographie: Il déclamaient souvent.

NISARD

ONCE upon a time, two men met and talked literature. One of them was a Hugolater, the other was not. And the infidel said to the faithful disciple: "You worship a god that is no god. His oracles are hollow." The Hugolater denied this. Then the other picked up a random volume of the master and said: "I will read from his works; listen, and interrupt me at the first original thought." And the infidel read, and the hours passed, and the day wore on toward evening, and still he read uninterrupted. When he looked up he saw that the faithful disciple was fast asleep. Was it because of this that he had not interrupted the reader? Be that as it may, when the other had awakened him, he cried out: "At least, you cannot deny that Hugo has a wonderful flow of words."

The worshipful admirer is quite right: Hugo is a marvellous master of expression. In gamut and in variety of resources he is almost unrivaled. In occasional felicity, in effulgent splendor, and in bursts of eloquence, he will bear comparison with the very greatest. Such gifts belong to only a few in the long roll of the poets—they belong only to those who are, like Hugo, marvellous masters of expression. Accordingly, in a study of his style, after the enumeration of each of

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the many faults which unhappily are the makeweight of these remarkable qualities, the critic ought to add the refrain: Still Hugo is a marvellous master of expression. But to do this a hundred times in succession would be to let oneself fall into one of Hugo's most persistent faults, repetition,—unredeemed by his equally persistent virtuosity. So let the reader, throughout the present chapter, after the making one by one of the strictures that Hugo's style invites, imagine each one followed by the counterblast of a band of devoted admirers hymning in constantly growing crescendo the triumphant refrain: Still Hugo is a marvellous master of expression!

"In M. Victor Hugo we have (his worshippers must pardon me for saying so) the average sensual man impassioned and grandiloquent." That is one of Matthew Arnold's never very flattering utterances regarding Hugo. For Matthew Arnold, Hugo was, in a word, a not very substantial rhetorician. Señor Menendez y Pelayo, although a compatriot of Castelar, and as such far more susceptible to the spell of rhetoric than our classical English critic, also sees in Hugo above all a rhetorician. "Victor Hugo," he says (not without a shade of rhetoric in his own words), "is one of the most extraordinary beings that God has ever sent into the world of poetry, but his power derives mainly from his rhetoric."

It is a significant fact that for nearly a decade and up to the age of twenty-five, Hugo, in his poetical productions, consecrated himself to the ode, to the highly artificial dithyrambic ode after the eighteenth century model. He found this vehicle not unsatisfactory, even at a period when a youthful poet usually feels the greatest impulse toward expressing himself with all the unrestraint of purely personal lyricism. Hugo wrote, then as always, for an audience. It was not from within but from without that, in these ten long years of academic verse-making, he allowed both the manner and the matter of his poetry to be imposed upon him.

Faute d'idée, il allait faire une ode.

(BÉRANGER)

He is, from the very beginning, a public poet.

His long apprenticeship to the ode was undoubtedly disastrous to him. He remains an odist even in his most lyric and most personal verse, that is to say, he remains, on the whole, on the outside of his subject, he always stages it. To the refreshing fountain-head of pure poetry, which lies far removed from the great highways on which march



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the procession of stately rhetoricians and the showy parade of orators and publicists—to this it is not his wont nor his peculiar talent to guide or to allure us. He prefers to address an audience. The French poets generally, and Hugo especially, have undergone the long discipline of the *classe de rhétorique*, and they have not sufficiently forgotten what they learned there. The French Muse prefers to deliver itself from the rostrum, and French poetry, for the most part, is the perfect product of a literary age of bronze.

Brunetière, in discussing the evolution of Hugo's talent, finds that he was at first oratorical, but that he early became lyrical. The really notable point here is, however, that this lyricism does not actually replace the rhetoric but is merely superimposed upon it. In his essential nature, Hugo remains from first to last an oratorical poet endowed with a lyrical imagination. Although he at times conceived himself as reacting against the rhetoric of the classical school, in reality he only substituted a new and more unrestrained rhetoric for the older and soberer kind.

Je criai dans la foudre et le vent:  
Guerre à la rhétorique et paix à la syntaxe!

The very lines prove that, far from being at war, Hugo is on the very best of terms with rhetoric. His conception of poetry, not when he is attempting to reduce it to critical formulas, but when, half unconsciously, he betrays his notion of what it really is, throws a vivid light on both his practice and his ideal. "God gives to the poet," he says,

Le souffle épars dans l'univers,  
La vie et la pensée, et les foudres tonnantes,  
Et le splendide essaim des strophes frissonnantes.

The thunders and splendors of speech, that is truly what he sought, and not unsuccessfully, to put into his style.

Hugo's style shows at every turn that the author courts the noisy inspiration of publicity and scorns the shyer poetry which is the fruit of solitude. It is too much a product of intention; it seldom seems spontaneous and unaffected. It is always art, not nature, that speaks through it. When Hugo is natural, it is usually because, with the best will in the world to be otherwise, he has not succeeded. His style is that of a deliberate, but a defiant, artist. No poet ever had more moulds in which to shape it, but it always exhibits something of the metallic hardness, the sharpness of contour, the too visible pre-arrangement that hint of the mould. It is indeed apt to be most studied

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when it is at its best. It is often excellently rhetorical, but it is so even then at the expense of truly poetic quality. In particular, the elaborate climax, the favorite form of rhetorical development with Hugo, has a visible and orderly arrangement that in reality belongs to prose. We mount with mechanical regularity up the successive rungs of the climax toward an expected surprise. In his highly elaborated and often magnificent passages, Hugo's style exhibits an insistent symmetry, and an unmistakable method in its poetic madness, that suggest the conscious rhetorician sagaciously disposing his inspiration with a view not only to utilizing every scrap of it, but also to doubling the value of every scrap by careful juxtaposition and contrast. Hugo's style has not the spendthrift prodigality of genius, though it has plenty of the dispersion that is usually due to an insufficiency of genius. *Le plus conscient des artistes*,<sup>1</sup> he is always highly conscious of what he is saying, he is not so possessed and overmastered by his theme that he becomes its mouthpiece and lets it speak through him; it is always he who speaks through it—as is inevitably the case with the thorough-going practitioner of art for art's sake. From this oratorical tone proceed all the principal features of his style.

Oratory, as compared with poetry, aims at more striking effects, effects more stirring but also more superficial. Poetry is preoccupied with its message, oratory with its audience. The method and the matter of each are fundamentally different, and it is an egregious error, a radical confusion of *genres* productive of a pervasive and disturbing falsity, to allow either to usurp the function of the other. The oratorical style is always keyed up to a higher pitch and to a louder tone than are proper to poetry. Even the very best rhetorical poetry is ultimately dissatisfying. Its effects seem superficial or violent; and its high points imply a reënforcement of these; in pure poetry the high points imply greater delicacy or greater depth. The heightened style of Hugo is therefore not simply at one remove, but at more than one remove, from that appropriate to poetry. It has a not wholly natural orotundity, often a decided shrillness of tone.

Hugo set out on his triumphal march up the slopes of Parnassus, possessed of a brass trumpet of a dimension and a sonority quite unparalleled. It seems veritably the "monstrous clarion" that he describes in the "Légende,"

Et ce clairon semblait, au seuil profond des cieux,  
Calme, attendre le souffle immense de l'archange.

<sup>1</sup>Mabilleau.

It is on this gigantic instrument that Hugo has played his most spirit-stirring tunes, making the valleys of Parnassus ring from side to side, as they never did before, nor are like to do again. It is a compelling and exciting music, of infinite volume and variety, though to a nice ear it seems at times over-insistent—and one fancies the startled nightingales creeping a little deeper into the foliage at the passage of this resonant *Chantecler*. However, although the trumpet is his favorite instrument, it is not his only one. He is fond of the anti-thetic, and, though at somewhat rare intervals, loves to intersperse his stentorian trumpeting with soft Lydian airs elicited from the most dulcet-toned of flutes, with charming little capriccios and occasionally with songs of genuine and subdued sweetness, exceedingly delightful as pure poetry.

Why has he condescended to give us so few? Is it that he instinctively felt that in this kind his songs must always seem distinctly secondary beside those of the really supreme masters? At any rate, this Fra Bartolommeo of romanticism, after a momentary excursion into the realm of exquisite miniature, always reverts again to the gigantic and the over-strained. After a momentary respite, we always find him addressing himself once more to his clarion-music and once more blowing with leathern lungs and wonderful virtuosity and science, his stupendous brass trumpet. It is seldom indeed that he abandons this instrument through a whole poem. Too often even, when he introduces softer strains, it is with the malign intention of drowning them by a sudden final plunge into a wildly contrasted and exciting fanfare that echoes to the hills and vales like an Alpine horn. And sometimes this blast is of so equivocal a quality that what to some seems to be music seems to others to have degenerated into mere noise, *ad implendas aures, latum et sonans*. The brass that was to be used for making the giant clarion seems to have been replaced by that cheaper substitute which is within the reach of even the humblest poet's purse, and which can render a far more superbly hollow volume of sound than brass—I mean that most ductile and malleable metal which is the basis of literary stage-thunder. There is in Hugo an abundance of that perfectly commonplace rhetoric that borders on sheer bombast.

The fatal weakness of the rhetorical style is that it demands a false perspective, a stage-focus and lime-lights. It is not adapted for the tell-tale light of day. It aims perfidiously to influence the judgment by surreptitiously exciting the senses. We instinctively feel that this is

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not the voice of disinterested truth, but that of a special pleader. The exaggeration or the distortion may be simply in the expression, the rhetoric may be honest rhetoric, yet the wilful unnaturalness of the words casts a suspicion of wilful perversion on the idea.

Le corps, époux impur de l'âme,  
Plein de vils appétits d'où naît le vice infâme,  
Pesant, fétide, abject, malade à tous moments,  
Branlant sur sa charpente affreuse d'ossements,  
Gonflé d'humeurs, couvert d'une peau qui se ride,  
Souffrant le froid, le chaud, la faim, la soif aride,  
Traîne un ventre hideux, s'assouvit, mange et dort,  
Mais il vieillit enfin, et, lorsque vient la mort,  
L'âme vers la lumière éclatante et dorée  
S'envole, de ce monstre horrible délivrée.

Can we be poetically edified by such sounding verse, in which one of the immemorial and austere commonplaces of reason puts on a false show of newness by clothing itself in the frippery of mediæval fanaticism?

If we conceive poetry as a finer interpretation of reality, a process to which the systematic perversion of the truth is of all things the most fatal, and if we conceive rhetoric as a highly colored and partisan presentation of reality, bent above all on exciting the reader, and therefore irresistibly tempted to narrow and render rigid (and what is this but to violate and pervert?) the truth, we can readily comprehend how fatal to the real essence of poetry is the superficial splendor it may borrow from rhetoric.

Byron has to a certain extent taught us this in our own poetry. Yet Byron was primarily a poet; he lived, in his better moods, and he breathed freely, only in the world of sentiments and ideas in which the true poet instinctively seeks refuge. He even entertained a most unreasonable scorn and hostility for the world about him, because he was unable to interpret it poetically. The substance of his work is accordingly for the most part poetical, though often somewhat flimsily so. It is the manner that is sometimes so grandly and sometimes so exasperatingly rhetorical. It is poetry suffused with rhetoric. Hugo, however, is far more profoundly a rhetorician. In spite of his scorn for the bourgeois, he is, unlike Byron, very much a bourgeois himself. He is able to breathe quite freely in an atmosphere that Byron found irrespirable; he even turns instinctively toward the world where men struggle for place and power, as shown by his desertion of poetry for politics during ten long years, and by his perennial returns to themes



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of plebeian or middle-class interest. In his work it is less the substance than the adornments that are poetical, though these are nearly always brilliantly so. They are indeed of such dazzling brilliancy that many of his countrymen have hailed this supreme orator in rhyme as the greatest lyric poet of the world. They have in general failed to perceive that no poet has ever so consistently subordinated his poetic gifts to the imperious domination of his rhetorical faculty. No born poet would, and none but a born rhetorician could, write such verse as the following:

Oh! qu'il ne soit pas dit qu'à cause de cet homme  
La guillotine au noir panier, qu'avec dégoût  
Février avait prise et jetée à l'égout,  
S'est réveillée avec les bourreaux dans leurs bouges,  
A ressaisi sa hache entre ses deux bras rouges,  
Et dressant son poteau, dans les tombes scellé,  
Sinistre, a reparu sous le ciel étoilé.

The poet's imagination is indeed visible even here; but how evident it is that Apollo is serving Admetus, and that they are producing in collaboration the speech which the latter, as deputy-elect of the district of Pelion and Ossa, is to deliver at the opening of the coming session.

Brilliancy such poetry has—often the maximum of brilliancy—but how dearly it is paid for! How impenetrably hard this polished surface often is! How impossible is subtlety or delicacy of thought, how rare is even naturalness, exactness, or duly proportioned expression, in a style where the laws of emphasis and of subordination receive so little recognition, and where truth is always at the mercy of a metaphor or an antithesis!

To oppose a pendant to the column of Napoleon, Hugo will transform and antedate his own cathedral of Notre-Dame so that it becomes

Deux tours de granit faites par Charlemagne,

a typical example of the manner in which mere truth may suffer in the toils of rhetorical style. Let us quote a really fine specimen:

C'était l'heure où sortaient les chevaux du soleil.  
Le ciel, tout frémissant du glorieux réveil,  
Ouvrait les deux battants de sa porte sonore;  
Blancs, ils apparaissaient formidables d'aurore;  
Derrière eux, comme un orbe effrayant, couvert d'yeux,  
Eclatait la rondeur du grand char radieux;  
On distinguait le bras du dieu qui les dirige;



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Aquilon achevait d'atteler le quadrigé;  
Les quatre ardents chevaux dressaient leur poitrail d'or;  
Faisant leurs premiers pas, ils se cabraient encor  
Entre la zone obscure et la zone enflammée;  
De leurs crins, d'où semblait sortir une fumée  
De perles, de saphirs, d'onyx, de diamants,  
Dispersée et fuyante au fond des éléments,  
Les trois premiers, l'œil fier, la narine embrasée,  
Secouaient dans le jour des gouttes de rosée;  
Le dernier secouait des astres dans la nuit.

These are splendid verses, but, compared with Homer, how plainly their metallic sonority, their bold contour, their very prodigality of splendor, hint that they are the product of a great poet of the decadence, of a master worker in bronze, not in gold. Innumerable verses of Hugo are so absolutely in the manner of the brazen age, are so trumpet-like in quality and cadence, that they sound like a spirited translation of Lucan:

La Révolution, leur tendant sa mamelle,  
Leur fit boire une vie où la tombe se mêle;  
Et, stoïque, leur mit dans les veines un sang  
Qui, lorsqu'il faut sortir et couler, y consent.

Let us pause for a moment and study the action of this superb rhetoric—and the re-action that follows in its wake.

If, as a poet, Hugo is by no means unchallenged, and may even seem, as he did to Matthew Arnold, distinctly second-rate, "half genius and half charlatan," as an orator in verse, he is, despite his tantalizing lack of substance, perhaps without a peer.

Quo non præstantior alter  
Aere ciere viros Martemque accendere cantu.

Not that he is, even here on his vantage-ground, free from grave faults, faults which prevent him from giving us what is the most solid, if not the most brilliant, triumph of rhetoric, a complete and rounded whole. That demands a leading thought held in hand with unerring mastery. But, in default of solidity of structure, what brilliancy of surface and what superb execution! What marvels in occasional passages! What imposing mass and volume the stream of words attains here and there in its course, when at some favorable point it collects and rolls and plunges like a mighty cataract in successive leaps! Occasional spurts in Hugo's verse deserve to rank among the most splendid triumphs of mighty-mouthed eloquence.

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Not only is he master of all the flamboyant effects, the orchestral thunders and the dazzling sheet-lightnings which are the legitimate stage property of the orator, but he is a master of the oratorical vocabulary, in his case the richest and the most sonorous ever used; he is a master of an oratorical style unsurpassable for variety of effects, for surprises of verbal felicity and force, for towering climaxes that inspire one with breathless admiration as they rise with sustained majesty higher and higher into the air to the sound of his magical incantations, like Thebes to the music of Amphion. There is no other such master of the studied rhetorical period. In some of his best passages there is a gathering and rolling swell, a crashing crescendo of purely verbal music that momentarily uplifts and carries one along on a heaving tide of rapturous verse—purely sensuous rapture, but so imperious in its appeal that it hardly brooks any importunate inquisition as to its nature or its source.

Clairières, vallons verts, déserts sombres et doux,  
Vous savez que je suis calme et pur comme vous,  
Comme au ciel vos parfums, mon culte à Dieu s'élançe,  
Et je suis plein d'oubli comme vous de silence!  
La haine sur mon nom répand en vain son fiel;  
Toujours,—je vous atteste, ô bois aimés du ciel!—  
J'ai chassé loin de moi toute pensée amère,  
Et mon cœur est encor tel que le fit ma mère!

As for the mere truth, let that come off as it may! *Credat Judæus Apella!* But what proud oratory! It is the fusing of this Corinthian alloy with the rich metal of his style that imparts to the latter, even when least adequate to the due expression of the theme, an individual ring and a sonorous quality that almost make us, in our admiration, forget our proper business of sifting out little grains of golden meaning—and if possible of truth—from this magnificently rushing river of words in whose mighty current sense is submerged by sound—with a too easy triumph. For sense this magniloquence does not much abound in! The moment we allow the judicial spirit to react on it, we feel that we have been unwarrantably beguiled. It is quite without that directed movement and that inwoven logic, that persuasive power which are proper to sound oratory. It would be fatal, even while under the imperious spell of Hugo's finest passages, to forget that it is quite possible to be a powerful rhetorician, as Hugo unquestionably is, without being also a powerful writer. There is great danger, especially in French criticism, so fond of classifications and labels, that we shall accept unquestioningly what in reality is seriously

open to question, what, if accepted at all, should be accepted only with many reservations.

A style may be striking, vivid, colored, exciting, even violent, without being powerful. To be powerful, it must be effective. It must not leave us as it found us. It must have the power—for it is here that the element of real power comes in—of making not only a momentary but also a permanent impression. The real power of a style is measured mainly by its abiding effect, by its convincingness. Other qualities must be subservient to this end; they must cooperate in triumphantly achieving this end; the truth to be conveyed must not be lost in transit in the form of mere ebullition, of spurious excitement, of gyratory violence which subsides only to reveal the fact that the exhibiting rhetorician or the dancing dervish of song has not quit the spot where he has so showily performed. When the volume of utterance is not justified by an equivalent weight in the things uttered; when whole Niagaras of sound are spilled out only to convey the most tenuous sense; when the excitement of the style rises while the interest of the matter languishes; when high-sounding words run as avant-couriers to announce with great pomp and ceremony the ostentatious approach of much-bedizened commonplaces, whose uninspiring physiognomies peep out with an air of irredeemable vulgarity from the gorgeous frippery of words, commonplaces which we have already met a hundred times in undress uniform on every street-corner, then the judicious will be less impressed by the power of the style than by its impotence to accomplish the real ends for which style exists.

The disparity between Hugo's brilliant orotund utterance and the exiguity and commonplaceness of what he utters is the triumphant justification of those who deny him at once real power of style and real weight of thought. Real power of style comports authority. And of authority Hugo has not a particle. His style is abundantly powerful in detail, but it is weak as a whole. It performs marvellous feats, but they are comparatively purposeless. His style extorts wonder and admiration, it does not impose allegiance; it weaves no abiding spell. His eloquence has no bones; under its hard surface it is a pulpy mass without solid substructure. It is too swollen to gird itself up for serious work. Put to the test of practical politics in the Chamber, it was more productive of ridicule than of results. It is full of energy, but this energy is centrifugal; it plays about the portions of the subject that lend themselves to figures and irrelevant fantasies; it neglects the essential. The underlying ideas are buried under the

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superincumbent mass of words, or stretched to quite false proportions on the rack of fancy. They end by seeming less the matter of serious discussion than of stylistic exercitation. In reading such verses as

Judas buvant le sang que Jésus-Christ suait,

or again

Jésus baise en pleurant ces saintes actions  
Avec les lèvres de ses plaies,

we may feel that it is a not very deeply moved virtuoso that is eliciting these displeasing notes from his lyre.

Even waiving the question whether it is necessary for the poet to have an original as well as an intense vision of things, and to give a really new version of the matters that he touches, can even the consecrated commonplaces on which average humanity so largely lives retain any nutritive values when versified in the ultra-rhetorical style which is Hugo's native dialect? What weight, either as poetry or as philosophy, has such verse as this:

Et tu ne comprends pas que ton destin, à toi,  
C'est de penser! c'est d'être un mage et d'être un roi!  
C'est d'être un alchimiste alimentant la flamme  
Sous ce sombre alambic que tu nommes ton âme,  
Et de faire passer par ce creuset de feu  
La nature et le monde, et d'en extraire Dieu!

In such lines the poet is not even re-thinking time-honored commonplaces; he is simply playing with them. But what a strange choice of toys! Let us take his verse on a higher plane:

Qui sait si, ramassant à terre et sans effort  
Le ciseau colossal de Michel-Ange mort,  
Il ne doit pas, livrant au granit des batailles,  
Faire au marbre étonné de superbes entailles!

That is rhetorical verse of superb vigor, but, for all that, does it not illustrate a lack of equilibrium between the diverse elements of style, of that equilibrium which Hugo never aimed at because he never understood it? He always sacrifices to the quality which is uppermost in his mind, usually force, all those minor qualities which, though often very different from it in nature, must nevertheless be artistically reconciled and fused with it in order that the style may be really organized and living, instead of being only factitiously alive, however violently so it may be. We look for a style that may be measured



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by what it accomplishes, we get one that knows no measure outside of itself. We have in Hugo a writer who always says to himself: Let me be striking! never: Let me try to be sane!

Pope, when he penned his famous line on Bacon:

The wisest, brightest, meanest of mankind,

was making an unusual as well as an unwarrantable sacrifice of sanity on the altar of antithesis. But what is for a circumspect and prudent genius like Pope an altogether exceptional license, the Ultima Thule of boldness, is easily outdistanced by so naturally intemperate a genius as Hugo.

Tant qu'on admirera ce Bacon effrayant,  
Ce monstre fait d'azur et d'infamie, ayant  
Le cloaque dans l'âme et dans les yeux l'étoile . . .

In Pope's lines we may still see the portrait, though distorted, of the author of the *Essays*; in Hugo's we have an impossible monster.

This harshness of contour is pervasive in Hugo's manner. Everything is put boldly, baldly, and uncompromisingly. Hugo states the most impalpable and recondite intuitions of our sentient or our imaginative natures in the same dogmatic fashion as he announces the most patent fact,—that the sun is bright, for instance, or that his poetry is sublime. Where others indulge in a veiled allusion, he launches a proclamation. His is not merely a forcible, it is a dictatorial style: it does not elicit the reader's assent, it commands his submission. That is why his readers are usually either worshippers or rebels.

In Hugo there is a constant competition for first place between style and mannerism. Take him even at his very best, as in the following lines, a vision of Paris in the centuries to come:

Il se taira pourtant!—après bien des aurores,  
Bien des mois, bien des ans, bien des siècles couchés,  
Quand cette rive où l'eau se brise aux ponts sonores  
Sera rendue aux joncs murmurants et penchés;

Quand la Seine fuira de pierres obstruée,  
Usant quelque vieux dôme écroulé dans ses eaux,  
Attentive au doux vent qui porte à la nuée  
Le frisson du feuillage et le chant des oiseaux;

Lorsqu'elle coulera, la nuit, blanche dans l'ombre,  
Heureuse, en endormant son flot longtemps troublé,  
De pouvoir écouter enfin ces voix sans nombre  
Qui passent vaguement sous le ciel étoilé;

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Quand de cette cité, folle et rude ouvrière  
Qui, hâtant les destins à ses murs réservés,  
Sous son propre marteau s'en allant en poussière,  
Met son bronze en monnaie et son marbre en pavés; . . .

Here undeniably is masterly style, a superb roll of verse with a strength unknown to other French poets, and an intensity of life seldom equaled by the best of them; yet, even if we hesitated to see the unmistakable stamp of Hugo in the style, could anybody fail to recognize it in the manner, in the characteristic way in which the composer has mingled and juxtaposed the clarion notes of the brass instruments with the silver music of the flute—as well as in the turn which this orchestration has imposed on the development of the ideas themselves? This is Hugo's manner at its best, when it is appropriate and pleasing. It is not always so. When it degenerates into pure mannerism, it is often intensely displeasing. Turn back a few pages:

Quand les sévères Malesherbes  
Ont relevé leurs fronts superbes,  
Vous courez jouer dans les herbes,  
Sans savoir que tout doit finir,  
Et que votre race qui sombre  
Porte, à ses deux bouts couverts d'ombres,  
Ravillac dans le passé sombre,  
Robespierre dans l'avenir!

That surely, though skilful, is bad verse, even though the subject-matter may be such as comports considerable rhetoric. What shall we say when Hugo carries the same manner unmodified over into philosophic and moral verse in which a certain gravity and sobriety of style are indispensable passports for the ideas?

Tu sais que l'injustice habite  
Dans la demeure des vivants;  
Et que nos cœurs sont des arènes  
Où les passions souveraines,  
Groupe horrible en vain combattu,  
Lionnes, louves affamées,  
Tigresses de taches semées,  
Dévorent la chaste vertu.

Verse with that ring is insupportable—at least to an English ear. Yet so characteristic is it of Hugo, and so common throughout his work, that no one could fail to recognize it as his. A large part of his verse, an amazingly large part of it in fact, is made up of work not always by any means as bad as this (though not unfrequently even worse)

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but just as mechanical. At its best, when the style and the mannerism harmonize, the effect is extremely impressive, for Hugo generally seizes in masterly fashion the detail that imparts life. He is what the poets of the Roman decadence aspired to be, the supreme master of a style violent and declamatory, but instinct with an almost animal vigor. Even his worst pages are seldom absolutely unreadable. But the style is not simply alive, it is often convulsively alive. It utterly lacks the alternating rhythm of movement and repose. Everything is great, greater, or greatest. The style is a magnifying-glass. If Napoleon walks across his room in the palace, Hugo describes him

Ébranlant le plancher sous ses pas surhumains.

Yet Napoleon was only a bit over five feet tall! If a sinful man gives alms, his coin becomes for Hugo a

Sou hideux sur lequel le démon a craché.

If the flesh is weak though the spirit is willing, for Hugo it

Traîne avec Socrate Aspasia aux latrines.

If a law displeases him by its severity, he cries:

O loi dont frémirait même un livre de fer;  
Qui, par Néron dictée en un éclat de rire,  
Ferait pleurer le bronze où l'on voudrait l'écrire.

When he praises Paris, it is usually in this vein:

Quand Paris se met à l'ouvrage  
Dans sa forge aux mille clameurs,  
A tout peuple heureux, brave ou sage,  
Il prend ses lois, ses dieux, ses mœurs.  
Dans sa fournaise, pêle-mêle,  
Il fond, transforme et renouvelle  
Cette science universelle  
Qu'il emprunte à tous les humains;  
Puis il rejette aux peuples blêmes  
Leurs sceptres et leurs diadèmes,  
Leurs préjugés et leurs systèmes,  
Tout tordus par ses fortes mains!

How hard, how metallic, both the music and the language of the last passage, though really masterly in their bad kind. The misguided mortal who mistakes such rhetoric for poetry, may indeed rest assured that the Muses have many secrets which are not for his ears. Place beside this the famous chorus of the *Ædipus Coloneus*, and no one capable of appreciating the exquisite poetry which it offers,

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can escape feeling how signally lacking is Hugo's praise of Paris in those very things that he so noisily eulogizes, the luminous quality and the refining discipline. It is at bottom barbarous, and therefore, however splendid, it can not have what Hugo rightly proclaims to be the object and the final justification of poetry, a civilizing mission. With all his prodigal magnificence, Hugo remains essentially uncivilized, a sultan, not a king, in the realms of poetry.

In barbaric splendor Hugo abounds; in refining discipline he is utterly lacking. This is quite as apparent in his style as it is in his thought and in his imagination. This ill-dissimulated disorder is the most fundamental defect in his style. It possesses remarkable force, immense range, varied beauty and inexhaustible richness, yet we can not say of Hugo, as of a score of really great French writers, often far inferior to him in many ways, that he has a grand style, or a beautiful style, or a satisfying style. There are more scattered elements of beauty and of grandeur in Hugo's poetry than in the work of any other French poet, more strikingly beautiful lines and stanzas; yet, in the anthologies, even his finest poems do not outshine those of his less gifted rivals, Lamartine, Musset, or even de Vigny; and one may doubt if the pages devoted to him are quite so often or so fondly turned to. The reason is that his style is one which violates, quite as often as it follows, certain really fundamental laws of good writing. Is there a single page of his prose which escapes absolutely, at every point, the censure of even the most elementary good taste? His verse, thanks to the restraints imposed by rhyme and meter, comes off much better; yet, here too, one feels at every turn the same deplorable lack of discipline.

Hugo's style remains always that of the schoolboy of genius who puts a Phrygian bonnet on the old dictionary, and who refuses to profit by the precepts of his masters on the ground that genius is a law unto itself—a capital fallacy of the romanticists disastrously manifested in their art, their thought, and their life.

The classical school had rather austere subordinated language to the ideas it expressed. Hugo boldly reverses the process and proclaims the sovereignty of the Word:

Du sphinx Esprit Humain le mot sait le secret;  
Le mot veut, ne veut pas.

Ce qu'un mot ne sait pas, un autre le révèle.

Chacun d'eux du cerveau garde une région.



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Le mot fait vibrer tout au fond de nos esprits.

Car le mot, qu'on le sache, est un être vivant.

This is a fundamental point with Hugo. The word was for him an entity, not a cell in an organism, a fragmentary part in a greater whole. It had as good a claim on the poet as the group of words that we call an idea. In reading Hugo, one is dumbfounded to see how pervasively the mere shibboleths and watchwords of thought have usurped the place of thought itself, how mere words like Liberty, Humanity, Eternity, do duty on all the days of the year for ideas. In Hugo the idea says to the word: "Wherever two or three of you are gathered in my name, there I also am"—and its presence usually remains an act of faith. Hugo says that in every orator there is a thinker and a comedian. In Hugo the orator we miss the thinker. *Dimidiate Menander!*

In Wordsworth's theory of style, we see the predominance of the poet over the artist; he scorns the artist's worship of style for its own sake and thinks of it only as a channel for conveying into the spirit of the reader the sacred and healing influence of poetry. Hugo, on the contrary, is the apostle of the Word arrayed in all its splendors.

Il est vie, esprit, germe, ouragan, vertu, feu,

Car le mot c'est le Verbe, et le Verbe c'est Dieu.<sup>1</sup>

Hugo's prolonged and faithful worship implies that he enjoyed in an almost unprecedented degree the favor of the god. The inference is justified. Hugo is in his way a unique master of words. Of what nature is his mastery?

In the style of the greatest masters the words become alive in the handling; the life of the thought is transfused into them; they seem endowed with hitherto unknown powers. They attest a genuinely creative touch. Hugo's command of words is by no means of this kind. His phrase, intellectually viewed, almost never bears the stamp of a creative touch. Neither has it the concentration of the sententious writer. The sententious verse is the rarest of all things in Hugo. A line in which the thought dominates the expression is almost unique.

Quand l'impuissance écrit, elle signe Sagesse.

Though the manner is familiar, it nevertheless surprises us. Hugo is consequently one of the least quoted of French poets, and is quoted

<sup>1</sup> See the passage from M. Stapfer, page 315.

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only for ornament, not for use. His vocabulary is chosen only for its decorative qualities, its scintillant glitter and its euphonic resonance. It is the range and variety of his verbal wealth that are unexampled. He studied the dictionary more persistently and more fruitfully than any other book, though it was of all books the one he least needed to peruse. Like Gautier, he rifled it for unusual words to be stored up for opportune use. The whole unabridged dictionary had been shaken up, not in his hat, as Leconte de Lisle said of the symbolists' vocabulary, to be poured out pell-mell, but in his head, whence it re-issued with all the seductiveness of at least a lexical congruity. The richness and resourcefulness of his diction are such that he, more than any other French poet, makes us feel as if French poetry, like English, had a vocabulary of its own. The ineradicable suggestion of prose, which still lingers in French poetic style, he contrived to reduce to the vanishing point—a feat little less than marvellous in a language which had borne for two centuries the stamp of Boileau. As a source of poetic diction, Hugo will continue to be the indispensable study, the inexhaustible mine for future French poets. As an instrument for description, his vocabulary is immeasurably superior to that of every rival, and fairly justifies his boast of knowing the language better than any of his contemporaries. He was undoubtedly of all Frenchmen the one who had most words at his command. And when we consider that he has unquestionably touched the physical universe at more points and has put a vastly greater quantity of it into words than any other poet ever attempted to do, the wonder of his performance only grows. He can, in fact, do anything with words,—except express ideas. He commands and marshals them like a great military chieftain; he sends them forth in detachments, battalions and regiments; he makes them march and countermarch, and rend the air with their trumpet blasts, and shake the earth under their mighty tread. The music to which these legionary files of vocables perform their evolutions is grand and spirit-stirring; it makes the ears tingle and the nerves quiver, and, at least momentarily, makes us forget in the paroxysm of delight that all this splendid performance is only a showy procession and parade.

A host of such vast dimensions, recruited by a rebel, must necessarily be gathered according to a very catholic standard of eligibility and is sure to exhibit a barbarian contempt of tradition or decorum in conduct. A certain lawless arrogance is jauntily paraded. Hugo's authority is prone to assert itself in regions where the traditional style

had never ventured to penetrate, to extend *droit de cité* to whole nations and tribes of words which the past had disdainfully labeled barbarous. All the lexical exiles which the scrupulous taste of the classic school had spurned, all those which any kind of taste and every kind of school had unanimously expelled from the territory of art, and even those which had been repulsed when vainly attempting to cross its frontiers, all these Hugo has enlisted, and has added them, a great and motley horde, to his vast regular army. He calls the immense procession to a halt before the temple of art, and, defiantly picking out its most truculent and dishevelled members, he leads them before the altar to make mouths at the marble image of Racine and to overturn the statue of Boileau. This temple, which the broom of that classic Aristarch had swept so scrupulously clean, is desecrated by the foul invasion of these outcast and outlawed words that had hitherto skulked in obscure places, trailed in the streets, hidden in the shops, or discreetly staid at home up-stairs and down-stairs and in my lady's chamber.

Pauvre femme! son lait à sa tête est monté,

writes Hugo; and lest we fail to realize all the boldness of this heroic defiance of Boileau and good taste, he thrusts the line upon us at the very beginning of a poem! Nay—he is even capable of eulogizing through a score of pages a certain word which, although sublime, the well-known prudery of French taste forbids even him to transcribe—the famous *mot de Cambronne*.<sup>1</sup> Slang, technical jargon, the cant of thieves and worse folk, every stratum of the language from top to bottom is explored and exploited. The realms of poetry having been indefinitely extended by the annexation of the ugly and the grotesque (including the indecent), the vocabulary profits also by this expansion, and when Zola at last arrives, he finds his dictionary ready to his hand.<sup>2</sup>

This defiance of tradition appears in the copious introduction into verse of other novelties less objectionable but quite as recalcitrant to poetic treatment. The use of the run-over line is so essential and laudable a feature of Hugo's prosody, and has contributed so greatly to giving a less stiff-jointed gait to the monotonously regular classic alexandrine, that it would be ungrateful to pause over the occasional saltatory verses in which the poet has wantonly flaunted his prosodic

<sup>1</sup> Les Misérables (Waterloo).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Contemplations: *Intérieur*.

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independence, as in the famous opening line of "Hernani." These are only the very pardonable exuberances of youthful genius in high spirits, the antics of a holiday mood, not without a certain grace in their very gracelessness, a quite inevitable accompaniment of a reaction from the starched and solemn discipline of the expiring classic school. Perhaps one should not be too severe, either, in condemnation of the occasional obtrusion of dates in Hugo's verse, a practice which proceeds from the same rebellious impulse, although, in his fondness for whatever seemed unique in his own practice, he soon came to feel a certain delight (which his reader is far from sharing) in the not very agile metric trip of the French *millésime*.

Dans l'an cinquante-trois du siècle dix-neuvième—

Though everybody will recognize the verse as Hugo's, there are those perhaps who will suspect that it is not altogether beyond the compass of lesser geniuses. It jars a little, in a poem dealing with Dante, to come upon such a sandy line, or to find, in an epically dignified apotheosis of Napoleon II, an exordium of such dubious inspiration as this:

Mil huit cent onze!—O temps où des peuples sans nombre  
Attendaient, prosternés sous un nuage sombre,  
Que le ciel eût dit OUI!

though the date is perhaps in this burst of obstetric poetry the least questionable element. Nor can even the brilliant rhetorical suggestiveness of the date quite reconcile the ear to such lines as

Ceux de quatre-vingt-treize et de mil huit cent onze,

or

Et le vingt juin, le dix août, le six octobre.

The unerudite reader might almost suspect that he was overhearing a lesson in arithmetic, or the reading, touched with emotion, of a ledger. In a passage where the lightnings of eloquence have been pretty freely let loose, such a verse is apt to serve as a rod through which these celestial fires are suddenly and disastrously drawn down into the ground. Still these faults, though typical of Hugo's questionable taste, are only occasional blemishes not to be too much insisted on.

But can we speak with the same leniency of his use of proper names? This can not be attributed entirely to romantic rebellion against tradition. Hugo owes much of his charm to his instinctive love of



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words, to his profound delight in their power of suggestion or their mysterious music. A euphonious or exotic combination of vowels and consonants thrills him with a pleasure too great for renunciation. He gathers the specimen, presses it between the leaves of his lexicon, and from time to time, and often with logicless importunity, fetches it forth and rapturously parades it before our dazzled eyes. Consider his multiplied abuse of the word *fauve*, to quote the strangest example among many. Words have over him the potency of a magical incantation. Imagine the poet, sitting alone by his fireside, lost in reverie: quote to him some significant and suggestive fact—he will perhaps nod in apathetic response; quote to him some profound philosophical truth—he will perhaps nod without responding at all; but recite to him a series of strange, sonorous, voluminous and quite meaningless geographical or historical names, and be sure his eye will light up, his blood will flow faster, he will leap to his feet, sniff the air and paw the ground with joy like a war-horse at the sound of the trumpet.

Something of this almost physical susceptibility to the magic of sound, and something of this seemingly gratuitous intertangling of poetry with the music of its verbal medium, every truly musical poet no doubt exhibits. Hugo has it in a phenomenal degree, and is accordingly one of the most marvellous performers in prosodic harmony—as well as one of the most astounding of the dancing dervishes that howl and gyrate and make salaams in honor of the dictionary—especially of the appendices. He was smitten with what Baudelaire called *lexicomania*, perennially reading dictionaries, dialect lexicons, scientific, technical, geographical, and botanical word-books, &c.

"I loved to go to the Academy," Hugo told the Goncourts. "The sessions devoted to the Dictionary interested me. I dote on etymologies, I am charmed by the mystery locked up in those words, substantive and participle."

It is evident that words, mere words, and above all proper names, possessed for him in the highest degree sacred potencies and functions and exerted on him a semi-hypnotic spell; they echoed and reëchoed in the chambers of his mind, unmixed with nobler matter, until what had entered as mere sound ended by taking on a deceptive semblance of profound though ineffable sense. Hugo resembled the pious old lady who could be moved to tears by the very sound of the word Mesopotamia. His soul seems to run through a whole gamut of emotions to the music of biographic and topographic appellations,



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Et suit d'un long vivat  
Fulton, Garibaldi, Byron, John Brown et Watt,  
Et toi Socrate, et toi Jésus, et toi Voltaire!

He would probably not have been in the least disconcerted by Gautier's dictum that his finest verse was one made up of a half-dozen proper names.

However, this orchestration by means of mere names, this playing on their occult power of suggestiveness, can hardly be too discreetly indulged in. With Hugo it degenerated into a puerile superstition whose constantly recurring rites sink for the most part into a mere prosodic mechanism of the most exasperating kind. Now and then we may indeed meet a verse that owes to some unique exotic, felicitously fished out from the Geographical Gazetteer, a haunting music in which Hugo seems to have achieved the inconceivable miracle of translating Poe's most intensely and forlornly personal note into French.

La morne Palenqué gît dans les marais verts.

But such an exceptional delight we have to expiate by enduring hundreds of verses which seem the product of a tuneful index-maker madly oblivious of the exigencies of alphabetic order. No poet ever had so many proper names at his—often exclusive—command. Every morning, along with the two or three rolls for his breakfast, I suspect that the poet's *bonne* brought him two or three hundred proper names, culled from books of reference with a nice but partial ear for their sonority. The rolls disappeared; the names, alas! remain. Many a time they cloud the whole horizon of the printed page like a flight of locusts. They buzz about the ears, beat against the eye, and bewilder the brain. We often find six in a verse, a score in a stanza, and occasionally the two or three hundred are let loose upon the dismayed reader in the course of a few pages (in "Shakespeare" a round hundred are fired in a single volley). And what names! All the heteroclite and exotic appellatives that the dictionaries, supplemented by Hugo's own vivacious invention, could furnish him defile before our gaze:

Zultan, Nazamystus, Othon le Chassieux,  
Depuis Spignus jusqu'à Spartibor aux trois yeux.

We seem to have stumbled by some inauspicious chance into the lumber-room where the Muse of History has stored her log of black-listed candidates for immortality.

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A quoi bon être Arsès, Darius, Aramithres,  
Cyaxare, Sethos, Dardanus, Dercylas,  
Xercès, Nabonassar, Asar-Haddon, hélas!

This wild love of nouns and names is so fundamental in Hugo that it not only persists to the end, but grows as his aging faculties decline. The poet Henri de Régnier says felicitously: "From year to year this verbal exuberance becomes more magnificent, it swells from book to book, and in its excess, in its splendor, old age itself, far from extinguishing it, seems rather to reënforce it; it ends by giving to the nothingness of Hugo's thought a ghastly and fantastic life; and around the hoary and empty idol revolves evermore, like an inexhaustible garland incessantly reformed and reflowering, the flexible dance of the word." No more striking example could be cited of the growing lack of balance incident to letting one's peculiar talent expand indefinitely without chastening or questioning.

The mark of a great style is a dominating unity in diversity. Its diversity varies with the richness of the talent that goes into the texture, but its unity proceeds from the greatness and the harmony of the personality that is using the talent to express itself. Hugo's talent was endlessly rich, and few poets ever disposed of equal wealth of raw materials. But his personality was chaotic. He never labored to order it. It was all juxtaposed light and shade, a conflict of opposites, a battle-field of contrasts, a welter of antitheses. The antithesis, which to a harmonious mind is only a beginning, a disquieting challenge to activity, a chaos to be ordered, is to him a finality to run after and to rest in. Unity, that final and indispensable seal of style, that grace that consecrates the poet's utterance with a hint of something higher than the merely temporal, something of a cosmic and eternal order, he does not possess, nor seek, nor value. Behind his style there is no higher principle than caprice. Not classic symmetry but romantic expansiveness is his ideal. The ugly goes hand in hand with the beautiful, the grave with the gay, the solemn with the unseemly. They intermingle and overlap with all the impertinent wildness of unredeemed nature and in perpetual defiance of the *lucidus ordo* that it is the chief business of art, as of life, to impose upon them. Over the head of the angel projects the grimacing gargoyle, over the smiling landscape hangs a mass of inky cloud, at the end of the sunshiny path yawns a sinister abyss. The one thing we end by expecting is the unexpected, and the only thing that ever surprises us is the absence of a new surprise. This

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is in truth a rare enough occurrence, for it is contrary to the primary rules of Hugo's *Ars Poetica*:

Au milieu de cette humble et haute poésie,  
Dans cette paix sacrée où croît la fleur choisie,  
Où l'on entend couler les sources et les pleurs,  
Où les strophes, oiseaux peints de mille couleurs,  
Volent, chantant l'amour, l'espérance et la joie,  
Il faut que par instants on frissonne et qu'on voie  
Tout à coup, sombre, grave et terrible au passant,  
Un vers fauve sortir de l'ombre en rugissant!

A style aiming so constantly at effect must of necessity sacrifice naturalness. Bound at every turn to give us a new shock, it often secures its effects by coldly premeditated heats and by carefully ambushed excitements, that leap out with the mechanical precision of a Jack-in-the-box.

Un jour au Mont Atlas les collines jalouses  
Dirent . . .

That is a favorite type of Hugoesque exordium. Similarly, a large portion of Hugo's poems are conceived and executed primarily to lead up to a striking *finale*. The theatricality which led him to wind up each act of his plays with a bit of orotund clap-trap, appears also in the lyrics, which far too often end with a startling image, with a hyperbolic climax, or an orchestral reinforcement, and, in the great majority of cases, with an exclamation point. The extra emphasis, with which Hugo bears down on the concluding line, is akin to the crash of sound with which the ambitious amateur winds up a performance on the piano. It is so characteristic that it becomes a sort of *paraphe*, the poet's official signature.

One who thus depends on recurring surprises for effect necessarily dwells much in the region of the factitious and the false. When style remains natural, each thought engenders the next in a seemingly inevitable sequence. Surprising effects are mainly achieved by interrupting this continuity, and constantly recurring ones only by abolishing it. This lack of continuity, this invertebrate structure, is eminently characteristic of Hugo. He puts the tiniest grain of thought into his magical cup and immediately shakes out before our astonished eyes the most disparate chaos of developments.

He is the most consummate master the world has yet produced of that process of amplification with which Voltaire reproached the

rhetical teaching of the Jesuits. When he begins with a *maintenant*, we divine that the fatal adverb will cast its shadow forward over a score of verses; when he begins with a *quand*, we apprehend the projection of this temporal particle over half the page; when he says *enfin*, the knowing reader will turn a leaf or two to see if he concludes so speedily,—and when he says *moi*, we experience each time a new surprise that he should ever conclude at all.<sup>1</sup> The law of quantitative proportion existing between the idea and the words in which it is embodied is one of which he takes no cognizance. The various fractions of his ideas are often separated by intervals so great that the reader fails to bridge them. The stream of poetry does not move forward with a swift and impetuous current; it eddies and curls in leisurely fashion about every interrupting object it encounters in its course. It frequently suffers a complete arrest, allowing futile little rivulets to be diverted inland to the right and left, or great rivers to separate from it so that those who navigate its course are dubious as to which is the main stream and which the effluent branch, and sometimes in almost complete quiescence it spreads out laterally till it becomes a veritable lake where we wallow helplessly in a shoreless expanse of pure picturesqueness.

On avance toujours, on n'arrive jamais.

The poet stops at every moment to expatiate, to digress, to amplify, to adorn, and to describe. On innumerable pages whole firmaments of cloudy speech burst open and descend upon our heads while we stand exposed in drenched and impotent bewilderment under the unrelenting abundance of this Jupiter Pluvius of words.

Hugo aptly defined himself as a sonorous echo. He is not only the most sonorous echo in modern poetry—he is also the most prolonged. An idea which a Greek would have compressed into an epigram in four lines, Hugo expands into a hundred. He writes a poem on Marshal Bazaine who has escaped from prison. No! Hugo says, he can not escape, for he is imprisoned in a contempt from which there is no escaping. This simple idea is expanded through four pages, until the reader feels that he is in his turn imprisoned in a prolixity from

<sup>1</sup> In *Magnitudo Parvi* (Contemplations) a single logical proposition is amplified through five pages: *While* (stanzas 1-8) *the shepherd* (stanzas 10-14) *is alone* (stanzas 15-24) *he sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind* (stanzas 25 to the end).



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which there is no escaping.<sup>1</sup> In great poetry we meet occasional verses into which the poet seems to put himself entire. Hugo has not this fierce inner fire. The power which comes from concentration and intensity is not native to him; his is the inferior kind which comes from quantitative accumulation. He requires ample space to move in and prodigal abundance of material to work with.

This leisurely movement is especially characteristic of Hugo's descriptive method. Like most of his peculiarities it grows more marked as he advances. The "Contemplations" and the "Légende," though richer in detail than Hugo's previous work, show even less of concentration. Hugo's descriptions, unsurpassed in brilliancy and variety, are inferior to those of the greater masters in concentration and in the poetic warmth and intensity which it generates. They usually leave one a little cold. Hugo sees too comprehensively, and has not the taste to select from the mass of details the few that can do duty for all. He sees them, but he intermingles them with innumerable others which also hit the mark, but not in the center. He anticipates the descriptive formula so common with Zola and the naturalists and realists, and which writers of secondary talent are perforce fain to employ: he piles up fragmentary impressions till they become imposing by mere mass; he thus creates illusion by gradually hypnotizing the reader through interminable repetitions of similar effects and images till a composite picture at last forms and floats on the retina. Each of his books is a mighty Amazon of words down

<sup>1</sup> "Take away Hugo's antitheses and repetitions," says M. Doumic, "and very little will remain." "His repetitions," says Brunetière, "make up three-quarters of his work." "The principal habit of style and composition with Hugo is repetition," says Hennequin. Hugo says:

Ce sera l'harmonie qui dit tout,

and he straightway proceeds to define *tout* in twenty lines with a total outlay of not less than 54 nouns!

Compare the meandering movement of "Chants du Crépuscule," XXXIII, where the poet describes a silent church, using twenty lines to tell that the organ was not sounding, and twice as many more to tell what its music is like when it does sound and when the player's finger *se crispe et se rallonge*, whereupon we abandon the temple altogether to hear what some very improper persons outside say in 76 verses (and very impious things they say, too), after which we re-enter the church and the subject at last.

Often these deluges of words come in intensely concentrated form:

Ma volonté, mes pas, mes cris, mes vœux, ma flamme,

Soyez l'abri, le toit, le port, l'appui, l'asile.

Examples might be multiplied indefinitely.

which navigate two or three forlorn splinters of thought. Naturally, while this accumulation of garments is proceeding for the clothing of the idea, the idea itself often waits in chilly nakedness and grows only more cold as the preparations continue for warming it. We get at last the Chinese ice wrapped in hot dough that Heine spoke of. Every reader of Hugo is familiar with his device of studied and deliberate movement, in which an idea that seems to be always coming never comes until a long retinue of heralds have filed past successively announcing its gradual approach and until we reach

The last and only couplet, fraught  
With that unmeaning thing they call a thought.

"Crassus killed off the gladiators; Herod slew the infants; Charles IX exterminated the Huguenots; Peter the Great the Strelitz; Mehemet Ali the Mamelukes; Mahmoud the Janissaries; Danton massacred the prisoners. Louis Bonaparte invented a new massacre: the massacre of the passer-by." This is hardly good rhetoric. The blow hangs suspended too long. To make a half-dozen flourishes of the sword in the air before striking may be dazzling, but it is suggestive of the theatre. The blow should come down without affording the victim time to shift place. To some readers the consistent straining after effect by piling up climaxes seems actually to be the generating principle of Hugo's style.

"He drives us forward with blows, excites, crushes, raises, shakes, humiliates and overturns us in his precipitate flight, without giving any sign of being aware of our existence. We balance rapidly between the most contradictory sentiments that reading can excite, from irritated ennui to ardent enthusiasm, as if we were balls in his hand. Eternally long pages follow each other, in which Hugo is no longer himself. He misleads, wanders, groping in the darkness, and raves. We no longer hear the words of the man, but the mumbling and ravings of a madman. Enormous periods fall upon enormous periods, in avalanches dark and heavy; or little cuts upon little cuts, thick and raging like hailstones, while vacuity, absurdity, insane hyperbole and pedantry struggle with and crowd each other. . . . His art lies herein: a long and patient labor, which prepares an unlooked-for effect. He has no regard for us while arranging it, but wearies and provokes us; he is a disdainful and brutal workman, who notices neither our impatience nor our censure."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Edmondo de Amicis ("Paris").

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There is a description of Hugo's style by one who is trying to convey an exact, a vivid and at the same time a not unfavorable impression of its uniqueness and its power—and the attempt is not altogether unsuccessful. Yet one cannot but ask, after such a dubious tribute, whether any truly great literary style has ever been praised in such terms, and whether a writer who invites such eulogies is a poet of the first order or only a wonder-working magician.

Along with this tendency to unrestrained repetition may be noted several kindred mannerisms, such as the riotous use of digression, of contrast, of pedantic or idle details. Does a personage remotely connected with Hugo's plot, in "*Les Misérables*," fall at Waterloo—quick, a two hundred page digression on the battle of Waterloo! Does Marius fight in the barricades—quick, a three hundred page description of the barricades! Does Gavroche talk slang—quick, a fifty page digression on slang! Does Jean Valjean escape pursuit by swimming the sewers—quick, a hundred page digression on the Paris sewers! "In '*Les Misérables*,'" says Biré, "seven digressions alone fill 955 pages."

And then the antithesis in Hugo! How infallibly everything calls up its opposite! He leaps from pole to pole, heaps contrast on contrast, couples great with small, fuses shadow and sunshine, paints black on white, weds the far and the near, the unnatural and the impossible, until the pages seem all a clashing diversity and the poet himself one vile antithesis.

And how he abounds in superfluous detail! He thrusts into his work pell-mell every species of exotic odds and ends, scientific, historic, geographic, heraldic, numismatic, nautic, anything under heaven that can be extorted from cyclopædias, manuals, handbooks and learned repositories, until his page seems an amplification of the dictionary or an abstract of the encyclopædia, or the progeny of a lexicon happily married to a gazetteer. The only condition these details seem bound to fulfil is that they be recondite and irrelevant.

Yet Hugo suffers unduly, more perhaps than any other poet, if his style be measured by large general tests. In no poet is the defectiveness of the whole compensated by such multifarious beauty of detail. A poem flawless throughout is a rare apparition in his work; but a poem without some extraordinary beauty of detail is an even rarer one. Single lines and isolated passages recur at every turn which for exquisite beauty, for splendor, and even for power of a certain kind, are quite extraordinary.

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There are stanzas of sustained and soaring eloquence, moving forward with a stately march and a majestic amplitude, a studied but noble ease, worded with a perfection of phrase that gives to the French line almost the marmorean polish of the Latin. Such a poem as *Villequier*, flawlessly perfect in diction, reveals capacities in the language unexampled in Hugo's predecessors, yet so true to the genius of the language that Racine himself would for once have applauded. Innumerable verses, in which Hugo describes the sublimer aspects of nature, are unsurpassed for grandeur, and less profusely scattered through his work are occasional lines in which her more exquisite charms are rendered with singular felicity. In such verses, moreover, the beauty of the words is wedded to the music of the most varied and the most powerful harmonist that French poetry has known, a master of all that magical music of rhythm and rhyme which is after all the basis of poetic diction.

Et que la première onde aux premiers alcyons  
Donnait sous l'infini le long baiser nocturne.

In lines like these, the invidious gulf that separates French from English verse has been abolished. The language, by nature so light in texture, has here a majesty and a weight of poetic expression that remind one of the greatest masters working in the richer medium of English, or even of Latin. Such verse falls on the ear like that of *Lycidas*. It was a revelation to the readers of Hugo, and their gratitude was bound to correspond not only to its intrinsic merit but also to the actual novelty of such work for ears that heard such strains for the first time.

If Hugo's words often seem only a libretto having no other function than to bear his music, it is because his verse is so superior to his poetry; it is because, while with others the choice of words depends on a given idea, with him the choice of ideas depends on a given word. Euphony and sonority are his criterion. When he is not dealing with ideas, when it is not incumbent on him to do anything more than merely sing, what symphonious linkings of sound and sense he produces! He is unrivaled as a master of the resonant or dulcet accompaniment which the vowel key-board yields under the virtuoso's touch, of the orchestration of billowy periods and mighty lines, of the subtle counterpoint of interwoven verses long and short, or melodiously compounded stanzas with majestically moving lines, or leaping,



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lilting ones, or full-toned harmonies that fall on the ear with the irresistible crash of organ music.

What a metric feat he has performed in *Le Régiment du Baron Madruce*, in that spirited description of the marching mercenaries! Verse follows verse with a gait so martial and so regular, with a sound as of tramping feet and clanking steel, that the reader is dazzled and deafened with an almost physical realization of the movement of this passing host—so thoroughly have sound and sense been interfused, so full of imitative harmony is this magnificent defiling of sonorous and metallic words. It is this instrumental skill that makes the lover of purely artistic virtuosity fairly quiver with delight at Hugo's music. Let him demand this only and Hugo will indeed rarely disappoint him. That is what made of Swinburne, so cunning a harmonist himself, though a far less subtle and varied one, such a frenetic worshipper of Hugo. He felt that here was the greatest modern master in this intricate art.

It is true, in general, that Hugo, as a prosodist, inclined too readily to sacrifice the substantive qualities of poetry to harmony. More persistently than any one else he cultivated the *rime riche* (as well as the *rime rare*). Now the *rime riche*, despite the manifold charms it has added to French poetry, has been, on the whole, an evil genius. It made inevitable the subordination of sense to sound.

The romanticists of Hugo's school erected it into a veritable tyranny in their prosody. They insisted that their rhyme must be "relentlessly rich and original," Banville says. He adds that the first essential of good rhyme is to awaken surprise. This is the merest diletanteism. Nothing could be more remote from the sober good sense and the unobtrusive good-breeding of classic French rhyme, which, above all else, avoided the puerile and upstart ambition to be noisily ostentatious. In his unquestioning acceptance of the *rime riche*, Hugo showed himself once more a thorough-going practitioner of art for art's sake. What a vast amount of his poetry is inspired by the rhyme! How readily his mood becomes *sombre* only to rhyme with *ombre* or *gai* only to rhyme with *mai*! How many sacrifices he makes also to the rare as well as to the rich rhyme! When Cheops awakens from his millennial sleep to say nothing more recondite than *Eh bien!* is it not evident that he does so only to rhyme with *Libyen*? And we cannot but feel that we are indeed paying our scot if, because something is *sinistre*, we must try to recall the *Caïstre*, if we cannot hear of a *paria*

without renewing our acquaintance with *Beccaria*, if an allusion to *Epicure* compel us to couple Anacreon with him to form a *double Dioscure*, if the mention of a *psaume* oblige us to conceive Lysippus *debout sur l'Ithome*, if the introduction of an *idée* forces our spirit to fluctuate between *Judée* and *Chaldée*, or if a casual reference to an *idéal* makes it incumbent on us to think of Milton as a *songeur de Whitehall*.

These may be striking displays of skill—but sometimes even Hugo's skill deserts him and he makes unworthy and all too apparent sacrifices to the exigencies of rhyme. He has committed with tolerable frequency the crime, of which all French poets accuse one another, of padding his verse.

Quand le sang de Jésus tombe en vain goutte à goutte,  
Depuis dix-huit cents ans dans l'ombre qui l'écoute . . .

Such a couplet would find even among the most lenient critics none so poor to do it reverence.

In general, however, he courts difficulty only to triumph over it. In fact his joy in technique and his delight in overcoming its most complicated difficulties, lead him to multiply them till it is evident that he is far more bent on doing what others can not do than he is on saying what they can not say! How many poems he writes in those short meters which he manages with such rare prosodic skill, but which, aside from the fact that their very lightness is utterly repugnant to serious poetry, offer such technical difficulty that the introduction of any real burden of meaning would be quite impossible. Hugo too often sings of God and immortality to the tune of *Sara la Baigneuse*. That is why French taste, when not vowed to romanticism, often prefers Racine and La Fontaine to Hugo even as metrical artists. Although La Fontaine himself is far from equaling Hugo in variety and resourcefulness of rhythmic orchestration, it must be acknowledged that, like a true classic, he is a much more perfect artist; for, if Hugo makes every chord vibrate, La Fontaine touches only the right chord. Compared with Hugo, he affords an instructive example of the artistic superiority incident to sober classic husbandry of nature's gifts as opposed to romantic prodigality in their use. The sovereign sweetness of his subdued music is more permanently satisfying than the capricious and swelling harmonies of Hugo's habitual manner, in which mingle confusedly so many and

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such diverse instruments and in which the richness is so often achieved at the cost of harmonic fitness.<sup>1</sup>

To conclude: In so far as expression may be divorced from thought, Hugo is one of the greatest artists—in so far as it is wedded to thought, he is one of the least. No one can say with more magnificence of phrase: *The sun sets*, and no one can moralize on the event with more tumid falsity. In all those elements of style which depend on acuteness of intelligence, he is notably weak. In all those that depend on instinctive good taste, he is palpably deficient. In all those that depend on sincerity and intensity of sentiment, he is decidedly unsatisfactory. Lacking significance and concision, lacking sustained beauty, lacking naturalness, Hugo, rich as he is in compensatory qualities, is not and can never become a supreme classic. Beside the really great poets of the first order, the Homers, the Virgils, the Dantes, he is a decidedly secondary figure.

Hugo's style, with its constant suggestion of artifice, though it doubtless will always enrapture the injudicious, can never satisfy a sane taste. Criticism, which has already acknowledged that his title to rank among the supreme poets can not be based on his thought, on his claims as a *poet-prophet*, must ultimately recognize as a corollary of this truth that his prodigious effects of style can not possibly exalt him into the rank of a poet of the first order. The truly critical will never accede to Brunetière's paradox that certain poems of Hugo's are of unsurpassable beauty, though empty of all meaning. For it is not the gift of style in itself, even though it reconcile far more perfectly than Hugo's the elements of sanity and splendor, that can determine a poet's rank. It is the spirit governing the employment of this gift of style, it is what he says even more than how he says it. The great poet must (as Milton said) be himself a true poem. Hugo's personality, omnipresent in his work, was shallow; it lacked

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, even harmony is itself sacrificed and we get the *rocailleux* and cacophonous verses which disfigure Hugo's poetry quite as frequently as Lamartine's is disfigured by those careless lapses which he left to his secretary to mend.

Car ce sont ceux qui, seuls, justiciers des abîmes, . . .

Il fallait être noble. Hélas! le grain de sable

Est-il de son néant coupable et responsable?

Ah! quel accablement!

Even this is outdone by occasional negligences in Hugo's prose: Monsieur, dit le petit Savoyard, avec cette confiance de l'enfance qui se compose d'ignorance et d'innocence, ma pièce?

amplitude, majesty, and even seriousness. His motives as an artist are far from being of the highest, and his manner is often painfully lacking in the nobility and distinction which a great personality super-adds to a great talent. His style therefore, despite its multitudinous splendors and often because of them, is to use Matthew Arnold's well-chosen epithets "empty, theatrical, and violent." "Hugo," said Sainte-Beuve in 1835, "is a Frank" (which is only a polite way of saying *a barbarian*) "energetic and subtle, who has mastered to perfection all the technical and rhetorical resources of the Latin decadence."

The words are alarming ones. When one considers the Latin poetry of the decadence, the overstrained and declamatory manner of the brazen age, and reflects that this is what succeeded the serene beauty of Virgil, one feels serious misgivings as to what fate may threaten the far more tenuous and insecure hold that genuine poetry had gained in France when Hugo supervened and refurbished the old rhetorical ideal by which it had so long been spoiled—adding to its spurious charm all the glamour of his incomparably brilliant style. The dissolution may prove permanent, despite the efforts of feeble symbolists and *vers libristes* to fight it.

Hugo came to his poetic maturity in the midst of a literary revolution which was fundamentally changing the content and the style of both prose and verse. It is to him that is mainly attributed the honor of having revolutionized the language of French poetry. He appropriated this honor, and he has on the whole been taken at his word. He was undoubtedly of the romantic group the one who reacted most violently from the old régime in French poetry. He was the Robespierre of the movement, and ruthlessly guillotined many of the most obnoxiously big-wigged words of the classic school. However, there were other and more sagacious innovators, who distinguished liberty from license, and who stood for importing into the constitution of French poetry, not an anarchic freedom, but about the amount of liberty accorded to the freer poets of England. Their voices were less listened to, and their moderation unhappily found less acceptance than the more subversive theories of Hugo. Chateaubriand represents a revolution nearly as great in scope and far sounder in taste against the ideal of prose style current in the age of Voltaire: his prose bordered on poetry (often even trespassed beyond the border); and it was bound to initiate an equivalent reaction against the Delille style and the empire style. Moreover, Lamartine, de Vigny and others, despite a certain timidity, had, before Hugo assumed direction of the move-



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ment, already very considerably enlarged and renewed the old poetic formulary as regards both style and matter. The *Lac* was written when Hugo was still a school-boy. A new age, a new society, a new public, democratic, bourgeois, and industrial, instead of aristocratic, was bound to have a new literature and to speak a new language. Conservative as was Lamartine, the youthful Hugo, in reviewing the "Méditations," reproached him for his neologisms! The revolution was in fact in the air; it was even half realized, and in a fairly sane and natural manner, when Hugo came to lay hold of it with all the fanaticism of a radical reformer.

In speaking of this romantic renovation of the language of poetry, Hugo says: "The poets have done this work as the bees make their honey, in thinking of other things, without calculation, without premeditation, without system." He has in mind here the activity of himself and of his group—and, as far as Hugo is concerned, the statement is quite false. In a poem *Réponse à un acte d'accusation* written much later—we are at a loss to say when, although it bears the date 1834,—he himself asserts the very contrary of all this.

Je fis souffler un vent révolutionnaire.  
Je mis un bonnet rouge au vieux dictionnaire.  
Plus de mot sénateur, plus de mot roturier . . .  
Je violai du vers le cadavre fumant.

The language of these verses illustrates only too well the special contribution which Hugo made to romantic style. Others had stretched the old formulas enough to introduce the new elements that romantic art required: Hugo stretched them till they burst. With his defiance of all restriction taste expired. That is why Hugo and his school have roused such violent protest from those who remain old-fashioned enough to believe that style is not wholly a matter of individual caprice and that the masters of to-day must learn most of their art from the masters of yesterday. To the romantic repudiation of the continuity of tradition which they find inherent in all good art, they oppose the undeniable progression of decay apparent in what they regard as very questionable art. De Tocqueville thus protests against the rising tide of Rousseauistic *emphase*:

"If I were to give a scriptural genealogy of our modern popular writers, I should say that Rousseau lived twenty years and then begat Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre lived twenty years and then begat Chateaubriand, that Chateaubriand lived twenty

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years and then begat Victor Hugo; and that Victor Hugo, being tempted of the devil, is begetting every day."

In general, however, the romantic revolution in style has been accepted and even acclaimed as a kind of Shakespearean enrichment of a language which, it must be acknowledged, had been worn somewhat threadbare.

Hugo carried out this programme with such prodigal wealth of diction, such audacity in execution, and such an unexampled scorn for sober traditions and timid restraint, that the more modest tribute borne by his discreeter fellow-poets seemed negligible beside this inexhaustible Pactolus pouring its golden sands into the impoverished stream of French lyric poetry. Riches it brought and splendor; but has not romanticism fostered a certain taint of unsoundness in the French mind, and perhaps rendered permanently impossible what were once its most native and alluring graces, the moderation, the tact, the exquisite sobriety and sense of proportion, which in the Augustan period of French letters had been the ideal increasingly sought and increasingly achieved by the really great writers, by the true classics? If these finer virtues of the French mind have been during the nineteenth century more and more vanishing before the invasion of the intemperate, the gaudy, the theatrical, the adventurous, if French taste has been permanently impaired, is not the truculent romanticism of Hugo mainly to blame?

How painful to certain delicate and elect spirits, how fraught with evil consequences, was this declension from the old traditions of urbanity and restraint, is apparent in such an impassioned outburst as this of Edmond Scherer: "Taste is a labor that hides itself, and we rejoice only in showy artifices; . . . it is delicacy, and we adore force; it is moderation, and we prostrate ourselves before the measureless. Formerly the pencil was never light enough, nowadays it perforates the paper. Expression is no longer addressed to the mind but to the senses. The poet sets out in pursuit of strange words. The greatest writer is he who commands the most extensive and the most audacious vocabulary."

That the verse, as well as the style, offends many by its romantic license, is also apparent in the reservations or censures of many of Hugo's critics. Taine says: "We still lack a natural verse; that of Musset [Taine is referring to the *Premières Poésies* here] is loud; that of Victor Hugo is epileptic. They have either rent asunder or made motley the old classic garb with the irresponsibility of schoolboys or

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the rancor of reformers; but their Bohemian gear is as arbitrary as the conventional fashion. They have simply made convention stand on its head, and our poetry, hesitating between tinsel and tatters, still waits for an appropriate dress."

I said in the beginning that Hugo was a great master of expression—and I repeat it in concluding, for I have not essayed the idle task of maintaining the contrary; I have only attempted to show how this great mastery was vitiated by bad taste in a hundred forms so that it offers us the unedifying though splendid spectacle of the rich resourcefulness of a usurping rebel, rather than the calm majesty of a legitimate sovereign whose sway has the consecration of slow time and immemorial tradition. An artist still remains a secondary artist even though with the nodosity of the oak he join its strength, and even though to the contortion of the Sibyl he unite her inspiration. There is a finer art than this, an art less violent, more serene and adequate, less Titanic, more Olympian. As Joubert has said: "We must recognize as masters of words, those who know how to abuse them and those who know how to use them; but the latter are the kings of speech, the former its tyrants." Those wise words may well serve to sum up the constant moral of the whole discussion. Its occasional mood may be summed up in the words which Sainte-Beuve, thinking doubtless of Victor Hugo, appends to the above citation: "Yes, tyrants! Do not our Phalarises make their thoughts bellow in words fashioned and fused in bulls of brass?"

## CHAPTER IX

### THOUGHT

Nae iste magno conatu magnas nugas dixerit.

TERENCE.

J'ai tout pesé, j'ai vu le fond, j'ai fait la somme,  
Et je n'ai pas distrait un chiffre du total.

V. HUGO.

Il hennissait vers l'invisible,  
Il appelait l'ombre au secours.

V. HUGO

On ne lit pas impunément des niaiseries.

V. HUGO

“**T**HERE is no real masterpiece that does not satisfy both the artist and the philosopher,” says Hugo’s disciple Auguste Vacquerie, speaking with the perfect impartiality only possible, perhaps, to one who is neither. All Hugo’s admirers seem to assent to this doctrine, and the poet at every turn solicits its application. It would, it seems, be unfair to consider him solely as an artist; it is essential to study the thinker.

Before doing so, however, it will be well to pause for a moment to take stock of Hugo’s culture, of the intellectual baggage that he carried with him on his excursions into the world of ideas. “Until you understand a writer’s ignorance,” says Coleridge, “presume yourself ignorant of his understanding.” We have seen that Hugo possessed tireless energy. It was not, as soon becomes apparent to an attentive reader, of the kind that makes for scholarship. It was an energy too fiery, too imperious, to rest satisfied with the slow and laborious process of storing up knowledge. It impelled Hugo toward creation rather than toward acquisition. Most of the romantic poets, to put the truth bluntly, were too lazy to learn anything; Hugo was too energetic. At the age of fifteen he was already a full-fledged poet, and from that early period he was too busy (such is commonly the custom of writers of books) to entertain much commerce with the books written by others. He boasted of finding his books in the running



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brooks, or, if he now and then condescended to turn from the fount to the font, it was "to read the books that nobody else reads." Having a really remarkable memory, he thus appears at the same time strangely ignorant and strangely learned, as compared with other men. He seems to know nothing of what they know, but he always has the air of knowing all the rest. He does not know that Marcus Aurelius did not descend in direct line from Augustus, but he knows that Pope Urban IV was the son of a cobbler; he does not know (though he considered himself a second Æschylus) that the first Æschylus had fought at Marathon, but he knows (what no one else ever knew) that Sophocles quietly disdained Æschylus; he does not know that Catullus (who died 54 B. C.) could not have promenaded with Delia (who was the mistress of Tibullus) among the Christians persecuted by Nero, nor that Tibullus could not at the same date have sat at the feet of Lesbia (who was the mistress of Catullus), because both he and she were entombed before Christianity was born, and had as little to do with Nero as had the Huns whom Hugo describes as contributing to an orgy of war—in the palmiest days of the *pax Romana*. Hugo does not know these things (although he tells us that Tibullus and Virgil were his favorite Latin poets), but he knows that Scævius Memor was also a Roman poet; he does not know that Galgacus, being a Caledonian, (as he might have learned from Tacitus, his favorite historian) could not be a German hero, and could not woo German nymphs at the foot of Mount Adula, which is in Switzerland, but he knows that Tzavellas, as well as Byron, fought for the liberty of Greece; he does not know that Demeter, being the same as Ceres, cannot be her grandparent, but he knows that Allioth is a constellation, along with Sirius and Orion; he does not know that Epicurus was not an Indian philosopher, but he knows that Schahabaham was a tyrant. He shows his ignorance of both Greek and English when he derives *irony* from *iron*, but he proves his knowledge of both Italian and Spanish when he subscribes a letter to Sainte-Beuve *il vuestro hermano*. He betrays his ignorance of German literature by calling Goethe the author of "Wallenstein," but he reveals his knowledge of Basque by telling us that in that tongue *ariscat* means *bold*, and of Assyrian by telling us that in that language *alphaga* means a *fountain surrounded by trees*. Monsieur Souriau, impressed by Hugo's display of knowledge, sets him down as the most erudite of poets, and Monsieur Doumic, Tourgenieff, and even the worshipful Renouvier regard him as the most ignorant. Taine, it is said, described him as a man of encyclopædic ignorance.

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His admirers describe him as a man of encyclopædic learning. Both are right. The truth is that with a total incapacity for accumulating ordered knowledge of any system of facts or ideas, he had an extraordinary faculty for attracting and holding the loose molecules that are rubbed off from them by accidental contact. His head was a vast lumber-room stuffed with disconnected odds and ends. The book was jejune, but the index was amazingly copious. He carried on his person an unparalleled abundance of proper names, each striated with broken veins of random suggestiveness, but they constituted virtually all his cerebral baggage. He might have boasted, with Charles Lamb, of being, in everything that relates to science, a whole encyclopædia behind the rest of the world. And as to history, philosophy, literature even, he might almost have said as much. Sometimes he hides this defect in his armor by a false show of erudition. He refers to strange reading in inaccessible sources, or he cites recondite and obsolescent names that might over-awe even the most learned, or he supplements the deficiencies of his knowledge by the flora of a very lively imagination.

Ouvre un livre: Platon, Milton, Beccaria,

he says, and we, who have never read Beccaria, are duly impressed.

Je lis Lactance, Ildefonse,  
Saint-Ambroise, comme il sied,  
Juste-Lipse,

he announces nonchalantly, or he says in off-hand fashion

Un jour que je lisais Iamblique,  
Callinique, Augustin, Plotin!

He tells us that the three devils Raguhel, Oribel, and Tobiel were saints until 745, when the pope drove them out. The mediævalist Léon Gautier challenges him to produce his texts. He dilates in his prefaces on the learned research, wide reading and impeccably accurate note-taking that have gone into his plays and novels—and the erudite are hardly able to catalogue all his blunders. For his “Marie Tudor,” for instance, he cites the authority of a certain Franc. Baronum—a name which apparently concealed from him more successfully than it does from his readers that of Francis Bacon. The student for whom Beatrice Portinari may be a somewhat vague figure will be surprised to see how real she is for one whose imagination is not, like his own, fettered by any knowledge of obstinate facts:

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Ainsi marchait un soir dans un bois, à Florence,  
Le jeune Dante auprès de Béatrice enfant;  
Dante la contemplait, ivre, heureux, triomphant.  
Tout à coup elle dit: Si je mourais, mon Dante?  
. . . Et dès le lendemain il fit le premier vers  
Du poème qu'emplit la douleur insondée.

With the same easy disregard of the improbable and the impossible, he asserts that at Byron's death the portals of Westminster Abbey flew open to receive the remains of the great poet. He tells us with intrepid generalization that the English language of his day is almost the same as German of the fifteenth century, barring orthographic differences. He boldly asserts that the abyss which in French separates the language of verse from that of prose has no analogue in English, where there is hardly any difference at all, so that England has no prose. To come nearer home, he sings of a Canadian squaw hanging her baby's corpse in a palm-tree, while, in the colorful "Orientales," over the land of the free and the home of the brave floats a flag whose golden sky is strewn with blue stars!

Inexactitude of this sort, though multiplied indefinitely, is of little moment in any poet. But what is deplorable is that, in common with so many of his romantic fellow-poets, Hugo relied so exclusively on the powers of his own unaided genius that he wrote on all the most serious and profound problems of human thought without consenting to learn what they had meant to the real thinkers of the past, or to the scholars who knew the network of facts to which they are related, or even to the refined and cultivated minds for which they form the background of both life and literature. Hugo's phenomenal ignorance is unhappily equalled by his phenomenal lack of culture and by his inappreciation of its very meaning. He is thus led not only to write a huge volume on Shakespeare, which Renan rightly spoke of as *la risée de Paris*, but he pays through all his work the penalty of his primitivism and of his undisciplined though extraordinary poetic energy by remaining, as it were, on the outside of civilization.

Much ink and many contentious words have been expended in the discussion of the intellectual element in Hugo's work. *Il y a controverse à ce sujet*, as Brunetière says. The disagreement is radical. Lemaître, Faguet, Anatole France find him essentially an artist without ideas; Brunetière, while admitting that Hugo's thought is wholly extorted from his images, finds these at least not without a considerable burden of intellectual suggestiveness; Renouvier, himself a philosophic

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thinker of high standing, sees in Hugo a sort of vague *confrère*, not a systematic builder of elaborate structures of ideas, but a visionary seer, speaking with authentic voice of God, the soul, and all its mysteries. Finally, what is still more amazing to many, the convinced Hugolaters even find imbedded in the master's work a complete compendium of temporal and spiritual wisdom, adequately answering every need of the human spirit, the *summa* of all the ideas of his time. One of his American admirers has even hailed him as "the genius of meditation".

Hugo's anxious preoccupation with ideas grows naturally out of the high conception he had of the poet's rôle. *Le poète a charge d'âmes*, he says. This imposed upon him a lofty notion of the intellectual efforts incumbent upon whosoever would worthily discharge this sacred function. Hugo proclaimed, as Coleridge did, that a great poet is also and necessarily a great philosopher—and he even complicated the matter by adding that he must also be a great historian.

This severe conception of his office finds frequent expression even in Hugo's early works; in his later ones, it is omnipresent: he stands always pedestalled in an attitude of congealed intellection. While yet in his twenties, an age at which most poets are still wantonly lyrical, he speaks of

Mon âme, où ma pensée habite comme un monde;

he speaks of

Ces plis de mon front que creusent mes pensées.

When on the threshold of middle age, he refers to

Mes sujets éternels de méditations,  
Dieu, l'homme, l'avenir, la raison, la démence,  
Mes systèmes, tas sombre, échafaudage immense.

And some years later, in one of his finest elegiac poems, he says to the Lord:

Considérez encor que j'avais, dès l'aurore,  
Travaillé, combattu, pensé, marché, lutté,  
Expliquant la nature à l'homme qui l'ignore,  
Eclairant toute chose avec votre clarté.

Another poem of the same period runs:

J'ai compulsé l'antique archive universelle, . . .  
J'ai du dilemme humain touché l'extrémité.



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It is evident that throughout all his work Hugo always kept his eye fixed on

L'Enigme sacrée, au loin, sans vêtement,  
Montrant sa forme blanche au fond de l'Insondable.

The description is, to chaste minds, extremely suggestive of a phantom. Did Truth remain for Hugo only a phantom, a fleeting and inapprehensible vision, turning, like Daphne when he triumphantly grasped at her, into bootless though abundant laurels? Did he love her as the troubadour loved the countess of Tripoli, without having ever seen her? Did he set up in his heart an altar dedicated to Thought, as the Athenians set up one in honor of the Unknown God?

There is nothing more comical than the solemnity with which Hugo invests this priestly function of the poet, the hieratic pomp with which he announces the approach of the inspired thinker, the trumpet-blast with which he introduces him upon the stage. He speaks of him with the awe-struck attitude with which the South Sea savage might speak of the missionary who has diverted him from the profane transmutation of his wives and parents into soups and chops to the consideration of the mysteries of Augustinian theology:

Le penseur, vaste et noir missionnaire,  
Arrive du pays du rêve et du tonnerre!

Un de ces mages fiers,  
Que nous voyons parfois, blêmes passants des airs,  
Se ruer dans le gouffre où, comme eux, tu te plonges,  
Pâles, les poings crispés aux rênes de leurs songes.

Is it only the moderns who are profound, says Barbey d'Aurevilly, than whom there is no one I should more readily cite to prove that this privilege is not without exceptions. Hugo must, I fear, be cited along with him. Yet, if he is not a profound thinker, does he not possibly belong to that larger group, far more accessible usually to our apprehension and to our sympathies, the group of those who, if they are not profound thinkers, are shrewd and perhaps abundant thinkers, who, touching things lightly and touching many things, often say something that is at least sagacious and provocative of much agreement and occasionally even of a little thinking on our part? Hugo attempted infinitely more than this; has he not at least achieved this? His courage and his good-will in the matter were

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boundless. He warned his friends not to plunge into the ocean of thought:

Nagez à la surface ou jouez sur le bord,  
Car la pensée est sombre.

He himself plunged, never finding the waters too deep or the shores too precipitous.

If we classify his poetry, we shall find that the portion of it that is directly occupied with philosophical problems is far greater in bulk than any other category. Vainly does he begin with Juliette—it is ten to one that he will end with Jesus; let him begin with the toad, it is little less than certain that he will end with the Eternal. It is indeed undeniable that we everywhere encounter ideas in his poetry. There is no escaping them. Throughout all his works

*L'effet pleure et sans cesse interroge la cause.*

For Hugo, behind nature's most insignificant phenomena there always lurks a philosophical generalization; a never yet formulated truth. From every bud and every flower exhales a perfumed guess at the riddle of the universe; and these ambushed aliases of wisdom are always ready to rive their concealing continents and leap forth at the most unexpected moment to fall in marching line behind the poet. The unwary do not always notice that this showy retinue of ideas that follow like clients at his heels whenever he stalks abroad in the realm of poetry are after all very few in number, that they are always the same, and that they are, to speak out boldly, nothing but a set of beggarly notions intent only on borrowing and not on conferring splendor. And how many, even of those who do observe thus much, still are prone to exclaim: "How opulent this royal genius must be, since these beggars always follow him and never desert him for any one else!"

It is at this point that a certain difficulty and divergence arise in the discussion of Hugo as a thinker. He has benefited to the full from that perfidious suggestiveness of thought which words heavily weighted with philosophic connotations have for a reader hypnotized by the spell of art. Illumined by his imagination, the disseminated mica that gleams all over the surface of his page, has the radiance of pure silver. Yet, on close inspection, the result is disappointing. Here is a highly gifted poet who held that it is above all the mission of poetry to diffuse light, yet from his hundred volumes it would be impossible

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to extract even a half-dozen pages which, judged purely as thought, do not seem either trite or fantastic. His finest poems are, as Brunetière says, *la banalité même*. Yet our poet is in his way enamoured of ideas; he has a sheer delight, which age can not wither nor custom stale, in collecting and handling them, as a bibliophile does his books—without ever looking into them. The titles of his poems prove him the most philosophically inclined of all poets almost as conclusively as their contents prove him the least philosophically endowed. He wanders through the world of ideas like a blind man with a stick, getting everywhere but seeing nothing. And take note that this stick is not a mere vulgar walking-stick: it is cut from the best quality of hazel, and is in constant use as a divining-rod for locating the subterranean flow of currents of thought. Though it can not elicit them to the surface, the poet even listens at times with rapt ears to their darkling motion, when we ordinary mortals (perhaps not always wrongly) hear and suspect nothing whatever.

The sediments of thought, which in our inactive minds settle in mortuary quiescence, Hugo incessantly churns up into mad ebullition. If not a thinker, he at any rate has the religion, or the superstition, of thought. He has experienced a divine call and would fain take orders—if only it were not necessary first to encounter the tedium of prolonged study. Failing of this, he improvises with assiduity. No one has so often or so unctuously cited the world's greatest thinkers from Orpheus and Thales down to Voltaire and Beccaria—by name. And Spinoza! Does not Hugo invite the spirit of a dead lady to come back from the other world to tell him what Spinoza and Descartes think? It is only too evident that he disdained the more humdrum process of consulting their works. His summary way of dealing with these oracles, his capricious inclusions and rejections, are a very amusing display of fatuous ignorance. In "L'Ane," in which he attacks false learning, false science, and false philosophy, he selects as their representatives men whose names are the very lode-stars of the intellectual firmament:

Ces pâles nourrisseurs qui font du pain de cendre,  
Arius, Condillac, Locke, Erasme, Augustin.

It is noticeable, too, that Hugo never quotes the great men whom he so worshipfully celebrates—in fact, thanks to an utter absence of quotation, his works may be pronounced the most original in French literature.

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His chief virtue as a philosophic thinker is intellectual restlessness. The mystery of things appealed to him with such irresistible fascination that he dissolved the universe into a chaos of questions. The philosophy of his poems consists of a long climax of eloquent interrogations. He rejoices and revels with unending delectation in this mysterious penumbra of unanswered riddles. They never become stale for him. To his last day, they solicit him with the same freshness of unworn novelty. He retains always the habit of the child, and of the romantic poet, of letting intellectual questions reverberate, not in his intellect, but in his imagination. His ideas, instead of being classed and ordered in his brain, roll about at the will of every wind in the vast spaces of his fantasy. The lover of clear ideas strives to translate mystery into thought; Hugo strives with constant success to translate thought into mystery. He boasted of loving the clear and the exact—it was the very contrary that he loved. He felt the infinite nearer to him than any other poet, and he saw farther into it—because nothing ever rose to intercept his vision—and as regards the finite, was the case very different? His philosophic verses are like French matches: they refuse to burst into an illuminating flame, but their vague phosphorescence assails us with a tantalizing suggestion of unrealized light—and they usually come in packages of fifty.

Nothing more favors abundance of ideas than that inability to think of which Monsieur Lanson accuses Hugo. Of the ideas that one can have without thinking, Hugo probably had more than any man of his time: they sat so lightly upon him that he was equal to a tremendous load, and his triumphant vigor refused to reject any part of the enormous cargo, however unimportant. Of all the commonplaces that unintellectual mankind have invented, not one has eluded his keen eye. They are all in his pack. As in his dealings with words, with images, with sentiment, so in his dealings with ideas he was quite unselective. His was one of those minds which remain hospitably open to all ideas because none has ever taken possession; it was a synagogue kept perpetually open in expectation of a God yet to come. His hospitality was universal, and every idea that knocked at his door was lodged—if not nourished—in the vast caravansary of his spirit. No matter how hostile they might be to each other, how bursting with the venom of contradiction, how bristling with the hatred begot of immemorial opposition, the poet always knew the Circean spell that could turn their armored strength into unmartial softness, that could make Catholicism, pantheism, scepticism, royalism, republicanism,



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socialism, individualism, all the things that man has ever believed or that Frenchmen have ever denied, stretch their limbs in hypnotized quiescence in that peaceful dormitory.

How does the poet accomplish this miracle? By the most simple of means: by renouncing structural thought altogether, by merely juxtaposing ideas instead of harmonizing them. His ideas simply congregate. He often produces the impression of having ideas; he never produces the illusion of thinking.

The true thinker combines ideas into systems; Hugo reverses the process. Systems in his mind disintegrate into ideas; even these, unless crystallized by millennial pressure, crumble into inorganic particles. Just as his sentimental poetry usually offers in inorganic abundance scattered elements of feeling which refuse to combine and form a genuine passion, so the soil of his mind is strewn with particles of thought which with equally triumphant obstinacy refuse to combine into rational conceptions. He has only the scattered grains of sand out of which the philosopher's building-stones are made. His so-called philosophy is only a Sahara of non-cohesive commonplaces, a tenebrous chaos which, whenever the powerful breath of his style sets it in a whirl, becomes a magnificent sandstorm sweeping shapeless through the void.

Nearly all of Hugo's philosophic poems exhibit a striking family resemblance. The bulk of the poem is purely descriptive, presenting brilliantly varied pictures taken from field and forest, mountain and sea, or majestic and even sublime evocations of the infinitude of space. The philosophy, like La Fontaine's morality, comes in at the end: when it is not simply a prolonged drizzle of cheerless questionings, it is condensed into an easy abstraction like "Infini, Éternité," etc., pregnant words which have the happy privilege of being infinitely and eternally suggestive. The poet, unable to formulate definite instructions to these ambassadors of his wit, invests them with plenipotentiary powers—though, unlike that of most ambassadors, their function is not to conceal their sovereign's thought but to conceal his lack of thought.

In *Ce qu'on entend sur la Montagne*, a poem finely impressive for its scenic setting, Hugo relates how he was seated on a mountain-top overlooking the ocean, whence he heard two mighty voices:

J'écoutais, j'entendis, et jamais voix pareille  
Ne sortit d'une bouche et n'émut une oreille.

The two voices speak:

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L'une disait: NATURE! et l'autre: HUMANITÉ!

After which the poet meditates—more fruitfully than ever before, he naïvely adds. He asks himself

Pourquoi l'on est ici,  
Quel peut être après tout le but de tout ceci,  
Que fait l'âme, lequel vaut mieux d'être ou de vivre,  
Et pourquoi le Seigneur, qui seul lit à son livre,  
Mêle éternellement dans un fatal hymen  
Le chant de la nature au cri du genre humain?

And herewith the poet ends! As Faguet says: "Il s'esquive."

Similarly, in *La Pente de la Rêverie* the poet begins with magnificent promises, he seems indeed to be on the point of rending before our very eyes the veil that hides the last mysteries of the universe, he tells us that he has "seen all and has comprehended all!"

Or, ce que je voyais, je doute que je puisse  
Vous le peindre.

He adds that he came back from the abyss dazzled, panting, *stupide* (we believe it), horror-struck, for he had seen clear to the bottom, he had seen "Eternity"! But here he ungraciously stops and adds never a word to help us see it likewise.

What empty amplification of the marvellous element of a Grimm fairy-tale we find in *Pleurs dans la Nuit*, that prolix nightmare, whose thousand verses develop the one idea that the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, including all their embodiments in articles of human manufacture, are only spiritual lock-ups in which all the wicked souls of the past are incarcerated!

Again, in *Ibo*, that wild, uneven, and in parts admirable poem, is there any value in the poet's fine frenzy philosophically weighed?

Such verse as the following may serve as a summary illustration of the method and reach of Hugo's philosophic poetry:

Que croire? Oh, j'ai souvent, d'un œil peut-être expert,  
Fouillé ce noir problème où la sonde se perd!  
Ces vastes questions dont l'aspect toujours change,  
Comme la mer, tantôt cristal et tantôt fange,  
J'en ai tout remué, la surface et le fond!  
J'ai plongé dans le gouffre et l'ai trouvé profond!

One is hardly likely to echo this final verdict in regard to the poet himself. Would it be possible to speak of these *vastes questions* in a tone more naïvely infantine?

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Sublime étincelle  
Que fait Jéhovah!  
Rayon qu'on blasphème;  
Œil calme et suprême  
Qu'au front de Dieu même  
L'homme un jour creva!

Can one conceive that a poet who has once perpetrated philosophic verse of that caliber should by any miraculous chance ever write a single stanza of real philosophic poetry?

Hugo wanders like a tourist (without a guide book) through what Baudelaire admiringly calls a labyrinth of conjecture; he hovers intoxicated about the problems that he catalogues, without ever definitely formulating them and without truly feeling them. He threatens them with he knows not what mysterious and violent house-breakage and wholesale spoliation, and again and again he assures us that the dark deed is done. But, no—

Gresset se trompe, il n'est pas si coupable.

He has screwed up his philosophical courage to the point of ordering them to stand and deliver, but on their refusal he has not really ventured to clap predatory hands upon them, and returns home from his marauding expeditions into the infinite without the smallest incriminating specimen of it about his person. *Davus sum, non Œdipus!*

Monsieur Mabillean says: "The most violent pages of the "Châtiments" were composed by the poet while wildly rushing with great strides up and down the sea-shore shaking his fist toward the French coast and shouting his angry verses into the blast:

Ah! tu finiras bien par hurler, misérable!

If the reader does not know this, he can understand nothing of "Ibo", in which the "fierce athlete," the "pallid dreamer," the "wild seer" threatens to go beyond the "blue pilasters" to seize the "comet by the hair" and, "if the thunder bark," to roar in his turn."

Now, this may perhaps seem to some the properest mood for inditing lyric satire, but it can hardly seem such for a spirit wandering beyond the blue pilasters of Heaven and into the very presence of the Deity to seek light on the problem of man's relation to God. Such a violent attitude may to readers more appreciative of masquerade than of religious reverence appear very fine poetically, yet even they will hardly believe that it offers much prospect of the poet's bringing back with him

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anything more enlightening than the echo of his own eloquent roarings.  
As Hugo himself so wisely says,

Qu'importe à l'Incréé, qui, soulevant ses voiles,  
Nous offre le grand ciel, les mondes, les étoiles,  
Qu'une ombre lui montre le poing?

We are once more in the region, not of philosophic poetry, but of rather questionable art for art's sake. We have here a robustious variety of the æsthetic religiosity of Chateaubriand.

The inferiority of Hugo's philosophical ideas to the style and imagery with which he clothes them suggests that the artistic interest is decidedly uppermost, although that very human curiosity, which a man of lively imagination is bound to feel in the great questions of human destiny, could not but coexist in some degree with the artistic motive. In Hugo, however, it is never anything more than the merest curiosity. It never rises into a genuinely religious faith, or into an anguished questioning. That is why it was at all times able to co-habit in his mind with things apparently the most incompatible and terrestrial; and likewise that is why Hugo could so readily subdue his ideas to all the contradictory caprices of his artistry.

To reverse the process and to go behind the brilliant poetry to the ideas it embodies is an ungrateful task. It seems hardly fair to measure Hugo's thought by the prosaic standards of reason and common sense. They were not present when it was created. What right have they to be present when it is judged? Yet, in a world where crystallizations of thought are precipitated after all for their utility and not for the pleasure afforded by the sight of their multiform contours, even poetry must have some underlying logic and some ultimate significance.

As early as 1828, Rémusat sagaciously remarked that Hugo, even when he reasons, seems still to be using his imagination. Brunetière, writing over half a century later, and with all Hugo's work before him, says: "Hugo alone has never thought except in so far as he has imagined, and just as it is the rhyme that constitutes the *raison d'être* of his verse, so, even in his prose, one may say literally that it is the image that creates the idea." One may say of Hugo what was said of Villemain: When he has made a fine phrase, he seeks what idea he can put into it. The thought is like those stunted mulberry-trees in the Italian fields which serve as a support for the vines. It exists only for the greater glory of the image. It is not by any depth or by any sub-



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tlety that Hugo succeeds in elevating into poetry the commonplaces that he handles—it is always by the added image.

L'homme, fantôme errant, passe sans laisser même  
Son ombre sur le mur.

Felicity of this kind is fortuitous and local, and can not atone for the lack of thought steadily sustained at the height of a truly poetic mood. In his reflective poems, how incapable Hugo proves himself of moving with native ease in the rarer atmosphere to which such an image as that just quoted belongs.

Restons loin des objets dont la vue est charmée.

That is the false key which he strikes.

L'idéal tombe en poudre au toucher du réel.

That is the kind of wisdom that he derives from the caducity of mortal things.

It is true that while in a thinker's mind an idea is a nucleus around which gather corroborations and deductions, in a poet's mind it is a nucleus around which gather æsthetic sensations. To resolve an idea into images is therefore a normal poetic procedure. But Hugo's imagery, as Monsieur Mabillean has acutely pointed out, is seldom felicitous except when the moral idea which it adorns is itself derivative. Like the lady who bought a fine old doorplate in the hope of finding a husband nominally adapted to it, Hugo picks up and elaborates his images in the hope of finding among the innumerable moral or philosophical commonplaces in circulation some that will admit of adaptation. Thoughts thus far-fetched have interest as exhibitions of forlorn ingenuity rather than as embodiments of truth. They are a species of literary curios as hard to classify as La Fontaine's bat. Hugo's serious critics never seem less serious than when they strive with indulgent sophisms to persuade us that these intellectual fantasticalities have any real significance. They are only conceptual barnacles that gather and encrust the water-line of his poetic craft riding at anchor in an inexhaustible sea of images. If this substitution of the hazardous treasure-trove of thought for honest thinking be legitimate, let us hail Josh Billings also as a great thinker—his thoughts too, were, frequently suggested by felicitous images. Yet, this error is precisely the one into which many imprudent admirers fall. They subscribe to Hugo's fallacious dictum: "It is a rule without exception, whoever

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is splendid is profound." Mérimée was nearer to the truth when he accused Hugo of becoming so intoxicated with his own words that he would not take the trouble to think. Other admirers of Hugo are willing to abandon as insignificant such ideas as he has directly put into his work; but they frequently maintain that by implication it contains, dissolved in its splendid and original imagery and its pregnant words, a treasury of intellectual suggestiveness quite disproportionate to Hugo's very humble intellectual powers. We might say as much of an unabridged dictionary. And a sacred text, perhaps innocent of all recondite meaning, may by the same process be made to imply a whole creed. Even the simplest narrative may be found replete with Sibylline allegory. To credit the original, however, with all the ideas that may be deduced from it, may prove as hazardous in poetic as in Biblical criticism. To what extent is the poet really a co-partner in this implicated burden of thought?

Mais quand vous avez fait ce charmant *quoi qu'on die*,  
Avez-vous compris, vous, toute son énergie?  
Songiez-vous bien vous-même à tout ce qu'il nous dit,  
Et pensiez-vous alors y mettre tant d'esprit?

(MOLIERE)

Nisard found a most excellent contribution to literary criticism in the famous lines in which Hugo described himself as "a sonorous echo placed at the center of things." But Hugo assuredly had never dreamed of locking up so much intellectual content in his brilliant image, and for fifty years he never ceased to call Nisard an ass for having let this categorical statement out of the metaphorical bag. If we too ingeniously apply the same method, are we not in danger of deserving the same epithet as Nisard? Ideas accidentally derivative from imagery or called into being by the exigencies of rhyme, and which travel incognito, or ride tramp-fashion on the trucks of the rolling verse, waiving identification, and only to be inspected when pulled violently from their hiding-place, have no valid claim to passage. The real test of philosophic poetry is the success with which the poet puts ideas into it, ideas representing his own spiritual experiences and permanent attitudes. Of such ideas, Hugo has indeed wofully few to offer us, and his poetry usually suffers a piteous breakdown whenever he attempts the grandly serious. Save as an artist, he is negligible. The Attic taste of Doudan may be more safely invoked than the benevolent sophistries of Hugo's admirers: "By dint of hunting after effective words, words have become his masters; he

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follows wheresoever they lead him, with a conquering air that ill becomes so much nonsense."

Even when Hugo condescends to handle ideas as ideas and to state them in the language of the intellect instead of the dialect of the imagination, they have an elusive quality, a gelatinous shapelessness that makes them intangible. They do not belong in the category of definable, analyzable things. They float on the surface of his poetry like iridescent patches of non-absorbable oil, shaped and reshaped by every motion of the tide or the air. He spent half his life in painting the clouds that floated across his mental retina. To many of his poems one might append the note which he scrawled on one of his school-boy compositions: "Let him who can, find a title: I have yet to learn what I have been writing about." When Hugo talks of the literature of antiquity, for example, he sees it as something:

Où l'éclair gronde, où luit la mer, où l'astre rit,  
Et qu'emplissent les vents immenses de l'esprit.

When Hugo philosophizes his most characteristic strain is this:

Moi, proscrit, je travaille à l'éclosion sainte  
Des temps où l'homme aura plus d'espoir que de crainte,  
Et contempera l'aube afin de s'ôter mieux  
L'enfer du cœur, ayant le ciel devant les yeux.

Or to cite another example:

L'ombre ici-bas la moins transparente, c'est l'âme.  
L'homme est l'énigme étrange et triste de la femme,  
Et la femme est le sphinx de l'homme. Sombre loi!  
Personne ne connaît mon gouffre, excepté moi.  
Et moi-même, ai-je été jusqu'au fond? Mon abîme  
Est sinistre, surtout par le côté sublime.

When Hugo talks of social philosophy, it is in this fashion: "Progress is the need of azure;" which no one would dispute; "Justice is the profile of the face of God;" which no one could dispute. Even in a private letter he is capable of telling his correspondent that "the literature of democracy will have only one object: the increase of human light by the combined double radiance of the real and the ideal." Hugo always talks of the ideal in this off-hand way, as if it were an article of as fixed and well-known properties as loaf-sugar. Now, to talk in this devil-may-care fashion of the ideal is the surest sign of a second-rate intelligence, and, to tell the whole truth, of a third-rate morality as well.

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Hugo's thought, when not purely fanciful, is trite beyond that of any other great writer. In the world of ideas he has indeed been the foster-father of the maimed and the halt, the blind and the abandoned. He picks up an outcast commonplace from the mire, sterilizes it in the genial heat of his fancy, and presents it to us in fine raiment, quite free from any germs of thought. No one has said things more original in form or less original in substance. Masquerading in scintillating costumes, bespangled with all the brilliants with which his prodigal fancy can bedeck them, gracefully dancing behind the blazing foot-lights, or posing in statuesque attitudes and declaiming in language in which are lavished all the pomp and splendor of which the poet is so great a master, the platitudes of Hugo act their part with such accomplished histrionic art that many a dazzled spectator falls under the illusion and fancies that he finds himself in the presence of a profoundly impressive reality. He does not suspect that this long and splendid procession defiling across the stage is made up of a few dozen banalities, which, by marching round and round in never-ending circle with instantaneous changes of costume, produce the effect of a vast, onward-moving multitude. But let them appear off the stage, deprived of all the advantages of glamour and tinsel with which the incomparable showman sets them off, and what are these super-numeraries of his poetry, looked full in the face at close range, but the merest Bæotians?

It is because of this inability to get beyond the commonplaces of thought that one may say that Hugo is the representative of his century—and that one may also say that he is not its representative at all. Having no intellectual progeny of his own, he did what most of us do, he adopted that of others, and thus had a large though not very select family—so large, unhappily, that he was not on very intimate terms with many of its members. He was, more than any one else, the echo of all the popular ideas of his age in the vulgarized form which the conceptions of thinkers assume when they have prom-enaded a long time amid the crowd. Hugo is, intellectually, the most democratic of the nineteenth century poets, because he felt nothing of the instinctive recoil of more delicately constituted spirits from democratic vulgarity. To the cry of the multitude *panem et circenses* he responded as no one else ever did. Of the former he could give but little and that little singularly innutritious, but of the latter what unparalleled profusion! What could have so pleased the Parisian man-in-the-street, so fond of mere phrases, as to be told in 1871 that



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if France has been curtailed, Paris has been aggrandized; and that as much as France has lost of her territory, so much she has gained of radiance?

On the other hand, if we consider what is truly intellectual in the movements of the nineteenth century, we are constrained to acknowledge that Hugo's ignorance is only equaled by his indifference. His curiosity was never ardent enough to induce him to learn what either his contemporaries or their predecessors had said on the subjects of his meditations. He tells us that his books were the trees and streams, unaware that for one who boasts of being so exclusively "the interlocutor of the woods and of the wind" there is a certain danger of uttering things wooden or windy. Undisturbed by such reflections, Hugo calmly assures us that he improvised everything by the lightnings of his own crater—a splendid but a dubious sort of illumination, and one quite consistent with that "prodigious incomprehension or ignorance of the thinkers of all the ages" of which M. Doumic accuses him. Of the great movement of ideas of which the true representatives in France were men like Sainte-Beuve, Renan, and Taine, we may say that it did not even exist for Hugo. His ideas are quite unmodified by the historic, philosophic, and scientific currents of contemporary literature, except as these appear in newspaper travesty. He insured his primitivism against all risks of mutation and vicissitude by a policy of primeval ignorance. He is really the intellectual representative, not of nineteenth century Europe, but of Chaldæa in the age of Abraham.

Other matters of offense also confront Hugo's readers. He handles ideas with an intemperance of language that renders it as impossible as it would be uncharitable to measure his utterances by the criteria of logic and good sense. He has an intoxicated manner of which ecstasy, hyperbole and fantasticality are constant ingredients, while only too often reason, as far as such a thing is possible in human speech, is excluded. He at times abandons himself so completely to his afflatus that the reader may well suspect that the voice he hears comes from the wrong side of that thin partition which is said to separate great wit from madness. Is it great wit that is uppermost in this strophe?

Ainsi s'accomplit la genèse  
Du grand rien d'où naît le grand tout.  
Dieu pensif dit: Je suis bien aise  
Que ce qui gisait soit debout.

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Le néant dit: J'étais souffrance;  
La douleur dit: Je suis la France!  
O formidable vision!  
Ainsi tombe le noir suaire;  
Le désert devient ossuaire,  
Et l'ossuaire nation.

One may at best say of such poetry what Alice said of Jabberwocky: "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas, but I don't know what they are." And do not the following seem like verses etched by some leisurely prisoner on the same partition-wall?

Ayez pitié! voyez des âmes dans les choses.  
Hélas! le cabanon subit aussi l'écrou;  
Plaiguez le prisonnier, mais plaiguez le verrou;  
Plaiguez la chaîne au fond des bagnes insalubres,  
La hache et le billot sont deux êtres lugubres;  
La hache souffre autant que le corps, le billot  
Souffre autant que la tête; ô mystères d'en haut!

This extravagance of tone and matter is such that it is very difficult to know when we are to take Hugo seriously. In his "Shakespeare" he propounds the theory that men of genius are not simply "souls" but something very different, "great souls," specific emanations of the Deity, perhaps provenient from other planets, he hints, and sent *en fonction sublime* among mankind. He laments that we can only adumbrate, but can not discern, the law that governs such apparitions. "At times we fancy that we are surprising the phenomenon of the transmission of the idea, and it seems as though we see distinctly a hand take the torch from the grasp of him who departs to give it to him who comes. The year 1642, for example, is a strange one: Galileo dies and Newton is born. Good, here is a thread. But try to connect it, and it breaks at once." What profundity! Often, in reading Hugo, I ask myself if I have not by mistake picked up a work of Madame Blavatsky. Does the great theosophic oracle not seem to have collaborated in the following?

"To complement one universe with the other, to pour into the dearth of the one the superflux of the other, to increase liberty here and science there, and the ideal elsewhere, to communicate to the inferior worlds patterns of superior beauty, to exchange effluvia, to carry the central fire to the planets, to establish harmony between the different worlds of the same system, to hurry up those that are slow, to cross-fertilize the creation, does not this mysterious function exist?" Lucubrations of this scope about "solar men wandering about among

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terrestrial men," will probably seem to most readers a trifle barren. Are such speculative divagations, which to normally constituted minds would be perhaps impossible, to be set down as the natural flora of Hugo's primitivity, as the vague but powerful stirrings of a mind not yet wholly disentangled from the protoplasmic stage? These may be cogitations such as mother Eve indulged in her meditative moments—before the apple and the serpent. Or, perhaps, corresponding to the wilful madness which Hugo cultivated in his imagery, we have here a more involuntary kind spontaneously generated in the region of the intellect. It seems hard to believe that it is merely the simulated profundity of a charlatan.

Yet, even if it be not that of a downright charlatan, Hugo's manner of talking of ideas is as suspicious as it is irritating. It is not the prophetic manner; it is a parody of it. Philosophical problems, he tells us, are reserved for the "*grands esprits terribles*." Such problems are "steep as precipices, sinister depths over which lean the gigantic archangels of human intellect, formidable abysses which Lucretius, Manu, Saint Paul and Dante contemplate with that fulgurant eye which gazes fixedly on the infinite until it seems to hatch stars from it. It is probable that these contemplators are contemplated. However this may be, there are on this earth men—are they men?—who perceive distinctly on the far horizons of their dreams the heights of the absolute and who see the terrible vision of the infinite mount." The reader will remember how Jean Valjean effects one of his hair-breadth escapes by having himself buried alive. "To find air where there is none, to economize one's respiration for whole hours, to know how to choke without dying, that was one of the somber talents of Jean Valjean." To economize his respiration while spending whole hours in underground worlds of thought would seem also to have been one of the somber talents of Victor Hugo.

Posterity, in sifting the retainable residue from Hugo's poetry, will undoubtedly reject all that which the voluminous prophet contributed to the output of the poet,—and how much of the latter will perish at the same time, because inextricably interwoven with it! Nobody will hesitate to retain "Sara in the Bath." And few, I think, will hesitate to reject "God." Posterity for Hugo will be mainly made up of two classes of readers: first, those who, finding all their own ideas anticipated by him, will conclude that he is a great and austere thinker, a prophet, and secondly, those who believe that it is not necessary for a poet to have ideas (and who will complain that he has too many).

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Let the poet, these will say, sing to us, if he choose, of Phyllis and Glycera: if his song be beautiful and please us, we will ask for nothing more. Beside Homer there is a place for Anacreon, beside Virgil for Catullus. "Nothing is more beautiful," says Brunetière, who never understates a paradox, "than certain poems of Hugo, of which an exact criticism would not let a single verse stand; if, indeed, it did not prove with the greatest ease that at bottom they signify absolutely nothing." Those, however, who firmly believe that ideas are necessary to great poetry, and who, if pushed hard, would even undertake to point them out in Anacreon himself, will remain recalcitrant. Hugo, a pure virtuoso, despite much effort, never even remotely comprehended the rôle of ideas in poetry. He is a great musician who says to the first random idea: "Play me an accompaniment—and play it discreetly, for I (not you) am the performer." Those who are unwilling to accept the virtuoso, no matter how brilliant, will ask what Hugo has to say on the great problems which formed, not, as he proclaimed, the center, but the circumference of his poetry. He certainly invites and even forces us to ask this. He has written innumerable verses dealing with political and social questions, and whole volumes dealing with religion, expanding a half-dozen ideas into sixty thousand verses, says Lemaître, whose arithmetic, if capricious, is hardly so in his lesser figure. Even when, in lighter mood, Hugo sings of the eyes of Jeanneton or the bare feet of Lise and Rose, he seldom fails to assure us that these very terrestrial things are for him symbols of mysterious truths such as Plato never sounded. Why then should we not ask communication thereof in the favorable moments when Merlin is not too completely under the spell of Vivien?

When we come to consider those of Hugo's utterances in which he has aimed specifically to put these mysteries, as far as may be, into plain words and apprehensible formulas, we find ourselves disquieted and disconcerted in a variety of ways. Let us consider briefly, his specific utterances on religion, morals, politics, and literature.

During the Restoration, when Catholicism was in the fashion, Hugo was a Catholic in religion, somewhat as a pensioned poet is a loyalist in politics. It is acknowledged by all, including himself, that this early Catholicism was only a hired loom on which he wove his brilliant poetic embroideries. He felt the need of this tapestry background for his poetry so strongly that, long after it had faded, he continued



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to mingle the Christian and the sceptical strains. He sets up as the poet-prophet whose function is "to extract God, to plunge him into the hearts of men, to restore the altar" (and incidentally to set the world to rights), yet at the same time the sceptical note, the more or less genuine note of intellectual doubt, and the affected note of spiritual anguish incongruously traverse the prophetic strain, and suggest, even to the most sympathetic reader, that we have not risen above the region of æsthetics. The manufacture of a new religion in those days was a task undertaken in gaiety of heart by every Parisian journeyman of letters, by every embryo reformer, economist, and philosopher, as a proof of his deserving to pass master in his craft. Those were the days when *Enfantin* sat on a platform impersonating God, with a circle of worshipful gentlemen in sky-blue coats around him; the days when *George Sand* discovered that the religion of Christianity was incomplete, and modestly filled the gap by publishing a manuscript containing "The Truth" (*Spiridion*); the days when *Fourier* and *Cabet* offered to take the slow business of bringing about the millennium out of God's hands into their own more competent ones; the days when even the healthily unspiritual *Dumas* felt constrained to indite canticles to the Virgin, while *Balzac* was proposing to pick the lock of Infinity by means of mesmerism and was proclaiming that the secret of Jesus was animal magnetism.

L'homme le plus vulgaire a de grands mots profonds.

Could all this be, and the "sonorous echo" fail to repeat it? Could everybody else be raving with divine inspiration, and *Hugo* not become Messianic? Unless the garment of his thought was to have a hopelessly unfashionable cut, dating back to the days of good-sense, what could he do but don a prophetic robe, a shade bluer even than his brethren, and proceed to "restore the altar" undismayed by the little obstacle of having lost his faith while it was being restored? What if God has faded a little, shall there be no more Gods—at least while *Victor Hugo* lives? At any rate, at the very moment when, in his poetry, *Hugo* proposes to restore the altar, in his prose he confesses that his faith is now only "a religious and poetic ruin, which he views with respect but to which he no longer turns in prayer."

*Hugo's* religious poetry reflects every complexion, every mood and every variety of doctrine or dissent, covering the whole range from Catholic orthodoxy to pantheism and scepticism. It offers no pro-

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gression, but flits about backwards and forwards in this congeries of ideas with the agility of a bee in a bed of flowers. He tells the reader that he is about to restore the altar, but to Juliette he sings

Doute du prêtre et de l'autel,  
Mais crois à l'amour, ô ma vie!

The only altar that he bids fair to restore is that of Venus. It remains a perpetual and baffling wonder that words that have so little weightiness should seem to many readers to have so much weight, and should, at the same time, so heavily tax the wits of others to decide if in their lightness they have any weight at all—so difficult is it to decide when they have logical and when they have only phraseological significance. Renouvier, for example, often finds volumes of meaning where I find only volume of sound.

As a result, Hugo's religious utterances have been very diversely interpreted. At the one extreme we have Renouvier's Hugo, a *Chrétien sans le savoir* (an odd species) clinging always firmly to his belief in God, immortality, and moral responsibility; at the other extreme, we have Rochefort's Hugo, a *libre penseur* who is reported to have confessed confidentially his regret at having so interwoven the name of God with his work as to render the elimination of this embarrassing deadweight impossible. Hugo's actual thought—or shall I not rather say his more habitual mood?—seems to have lain between these two extremes. In the early period of exile, while he was particularly absorbed in spiritualistic manifestations, his transcendentalism appears to have been at its liveliest, finding expression at first in a phase of eagerly affirmative supernaturalism, but relapsing presently into a complacent and optimistic deism, while his ardor transferred itself mainly to a most uncharitable anti-clericalism of a decidedly Voltairian blatancy, which unintelligently confounded all creeds and all religions in its denunciation.<sup>1</sup> The Voltairianism is, doubtless, for the most part an expression of his hatred for the Second Empire, which the church had accepted and sanctioned. Hugo's transcendentalism could therefore after the *coup d'état* no longer harmonize with his Christianity as it had done in the past, and, on abandoning and reviling the church, he now tardily found himself in the position in which so many of his contemporaries had been a quarter of a century earlier—he was constrained, somewhat hurriedly, to invent a new religion.

This need of inventing a new religion is as a rule experienced only

<sup>1</sup> See "Religions et Religion," (1880).

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by those who have no talent for the practice of the old. Beyond this, Hugo had little qualification for the task. He undertakes, however, with a light heart, this expedition into the yet uncharted regions of infinity, undismayed by the shipwreck of previous explorers, and, like a new Columbus, sets out with his fleet of poetic caravels to sail the infinite sea. But he finds no *terra firma* in those mysterious regions, and returns from his many cruises without having raised his flag over any new dominions.

His *impressions de voyage* are, in general, the dreariest of reading. Half the "Contemplations" and hundreds upon hundreds of pages in his other works report with voluminous vagueness the vicissitudes of this interstellar Odyssey; even after his death, the oracle continued for years to speak from the tomb in numerous volumes full of prophetic import. While vainly seeking to grasp the infinite, he has himself come near creating it, for, if the word did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it to characterize the prolixity of this celestial logbook. It is the deadest portion of his work—always excepting the unburied remains of his public eloquence stacked up in the vast catacomb of his "Actes et Paroles". Even the most resolute of his worshippers seem to have contented themselves with sweeping its vast wastes from the safe precincts of the shore-line with a hasty survey of dismayed admiration.

Nevertheless, the reader who can discreetly tack and veer in the immensity of these sandy shoals of verse will be occasionally rewarded, though at a discouraging cost of weary travel, by boundless visions of ilimitable seas breaking (a little noisily) on the misty shores of eternity, by sublimely sculptured configurations into which the drifting denizens of cloudland are conjured by the enchanter's potent spells, and by strangely impressive voices that utter very eloquent but wofully elusive messages out of the celestial void to the dreaming poet—for all this novel religion, this fracas of cosmologic and cosmogonic poetry, this apocalyptic explication so wantonly darkening the mystery of things, all this is but the veriest and most unsubstantial of dreams. Yet the sense of mystery, the shuddering approach to the infinite, the vision of the phantasmal side of things finds powerful and wonderfully realistic and convincing expression, because Hugo himself really felt this and rejoiced in it poetically. True to his nature as a pictorial poet, he has rendered his sensations in merely material pictures in which mind and spirit have almost no share. It is not by dint of logical ratiocination, nor even by mystic meditation shutting its eyes to the outer world, that Hugo realizes the infinite. It is by a method of approach purely

external, by a grandiose reconstitution, by a limitless aggrandizement and by an intense and many-shaded coloration of what lay around him, that he has succeeded in communicating to us the sensation and at times almost the very vision of infinitude. But the sensation remains purely physical, the vision purely ocular. It is singularly impressive, but it is impressive solely by virtue of its picturesque quality—it is a painting. The poet remains an artist in the presence of the infinite as of the finite. His rapture is exclusively æsthetic. He loses himself in boundless space, seizes its fleeting aspects, its phantasmal mirage, its spectacular sublimities; he throws them on his canvas with a boldness of relief, a fierce blaze of light, a massy shade, that produce an almost oppressive sense of reality. But there his genius stops—however widely it range, its utmost effort cannot lift it above this material plane. He is quite incapable of putting into these pictures anything that will humanize their mystery, that will lift them into the compass of the spirit, that will constitute a reconciling bond of kinship between the mystery that dwells within man and the mystery that abides without. Magnificent as are his evocations of celestial landscape, and audacious beyond precedent as are the wild parabolas he describes again and again in his marvelous feats of sidereal aviation, it must be confessed that all this brings him after all no nearer to God. The least little grain of religious thought, dropping from the slender sheaf gleaned in the old fields that piety has toiled over for so many ages, has more and sweeter nutriment in it than all these multitudinous lines of altisonant verse which Hugo meant should shine as if they were the very jewels of the celestial diadem. As soon as his intellect supervenes and makes its commentary on the pictured visions, we get nothing more than vague and childish stammerings. Hugo's attempts to be positive and didactic, his conceptions and his explanations of the essence of things and the order of the universe represent an unconscious transfer of his cult of the grotesque from matters of aesthetics to matters of intellect.

The metaphysical, and not the physical, aspect of infinity is surely the one, and the only one, that can offer genuinely religious interest. If "the undevout astronomer is mad," it is because he remains obstinately imprisoned in the physical universe. It is here that Hugo seeks God exclusively. He can not disentangle himself from the framework of infinity which serves as a setting for his Deity.

Dieu, c'est un lieu fermé dont l'aurore a la clé  
Et la religion, c'est un ciel contemplé.



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Like Pope's poor Indian, he sees God in clouds and hears him in the wind. His God is a God of space, not a God of man.

Mon Dieu n'est ni païen, ni chrétien, ni biblique.

All this is at bottom nothing more than the shallow natural religion, so called, of the eighteenth century. Hugo has re-discovered it.

Je doute dans un temple, et sur un mont je crois.

The only approximation that Hugo makes between God and man is in the contrasted pettiness of the latter.

Homme, sache que Dieu pourrait prendre un cloporte,  
Un crapaud, l'acarus que ton ulcère porte,  
Et lui donner l'aurore et le septentrion . . .  
Sache que Dieu pourrait donner toutes ses gloires  
A ce vil ver de terre, immonde et chassieux,  
Sans étonner un seul archange dans les cieux.

However fertile in poetic effects, nothing is religiously more barren than this stupefying contemplation of the physical infinite. Even the most speculative mind can draw from such divagations through space no conclusions that bear an atom of convincing weight. What then could a mind so radically unspeculative as Hugo's bring back from these incursions into infinitude except the blank bewilderment of sterile wonder? Hence the recurrent sceptical note running through all his work to the very end. "Dieu" illustrates on a larger scale what Hugo has done in all his philosophic poems; he has asked again and again what is the formula of the infinite, with a prolixity that threatens to develop in his reader a far livelier sensation of it than any expressed by the poet.

Veux-tu, réponds, aller plus loin qu'Amos n'alla,  
Et plus avant qu'Esdras et qu'Elie, au delà  
Des prophètes pensifs et des blancs cénobites,  
Percer l'ombre, emporté par des ailes subites?  
. . . Veux-tu toucher le but, regarder l'Invisible,  
L'innommé, l'idéal, le réel, l'inouï?  
Comprendre, déchiffrer, lire? être un ébloui?

Such an invitation no one surely will refuse. But, alas, on the final page of the poem, just as the poet hints that he has at last reached the light, and penetrated the remotest recesses of the infinite, he suddenly

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and most ungraciously absconds into it himself. Just as we expect that he will at last speak out the secret, he tantalizingly sings:

Et je mourus!

And it so happens that Monsieur Stapfer, an intimate friend of Hugo's, has dashed our one remaining hope of finding this final word elsewhere in Hugo's work. He tells us that he had it from the poet's own lips that a certain sentence in his "William Shakespeare" contains the solution of the enigma and the explanation of the universe—yet he was, it seems, so lacking in noble curiosity that he did not summon the poet then and there to divulge its exact latitude and longitude in that tempestuous sea of words.

The problem of immortality and the itinerary of the soul in its post-mortem travels also greatly preoccupied Hugo. His reports are contradictory, but on the whole, he leans toward a loosely metempsychic explanation. In *Ce que dit la Bouche d'Ombre* he tells us how, at the Druidic stone of Rozel, a specter, reviving an old-fashioned but now happily discredited method of securing attention, seized him by the hair, and, lifting him into the empyrean, proceeded, while the poet remained in this elevated but uncomfortable state of receptivity, to dilate at great length on the laws of the universe. Things are not things—for Hugo there is nothing quite so spiritual as the material. Had he lived earlier, he would have belonged to that Manichean sect who so revered all life that "they begged pardon of their bread and ate it with pity and remorse." Souls, Hugo tells us, are omnipresent: the sea would not open its jaws night and day were its roaring not a form of intelligent speech, and, could we but distinguish, we should find trees, reeds and rocks articulate. Yea, this great globe itself is but a penitentiary of imprisoned souls, some locked up in tigers, lions, serpents, horses, Xerxes in excrement, Herod in the creaking osier of a cradle, and Judas in the expectoration of mankind, apparently flashing in and out of existence every time a pituitary impulse is born and dies on the lips of mortals;

Ce mulet fut sultan, ce cloporte était femme,  
L'arbre est un exilé, la roche est un proscrit;  
Est-ce que quelque part, par hasard, quelqu'un rit?

It is to be feared.

But enough of this! How coldly unconvincing is this mechanical hell! How incapable is Hugo of lending to all these chill phantasms

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of his unmetaphysical brain even a semblance of reality and of insuflating them with the faintest breath of life! Nothing could be more hopelessly artificial, more truly unimaginative than such imaginings. One has only to compare this pasteboard inferno with the lurid creation of Dante to realize how utterly Hugo lacks that higher creative imagination behind whose images there is an ordering intelligence that humanizes and invests with meaning the fictions of fancy. Fictions of fancy, it is to be suspected, are all that these conceptions were to Hugo; for it is hard to believe that such crude revivals of primitive forms of thought could be anything else in the age of Darwin and Taine—even for a poet who despised both and read neither.

In contradiction to this theory of terrestrial expiation Hugo suggests elsewhere that the planet Saturn is a sort of Siberia or Botany Bay to which sinful souls are posthumously transported. Again, in that most absurd of all his poems, *Sultan Mourad*, he seems to renounce the idea of expiation altogether, for he here propounds a theory of salvation so inclusive that it would hardly seem as if even the most ingenious of sinners could contrive to escape entanglement in its meshes:

Il suffit, pour sauver même l'homme inclément,  
Même le plus sanglant des bourreaux et des maîtres,  
Du moindre des bienfaits sur le dernier des êtres;  
Un seul instant d'amour rouvre l'Eden fermé;  
Un pourceau secouru pèse un monde opprimé.

At this rate, how (in Saturn) is the poor devil to recruit his population?

The whole theory of immortality as a reward of virtue reposes on the assumption of free-will and moral responsibility. To cultivate a sedulous ignorance of the fatalistic theories that run counter to this conception is by no means a sure method of securing immunity from them. They are hardly to be dodged in that modern Athens, Paris. Hugo might have stumbled upon them in the poetry of Leconte de Lisle, or of that austere scribe Armand Sylvestre, or in a Palais-Royal vaudeville, or even in the newspapers or in the more serious flights of the conversation of the young ladies who sup at midnight at the boulevard cafés. It is even conceivable that such ideas might have been the fruit of his own meditations. However they came there, these fatalistic notions are found imbedded, like worms in amber, in Hugo's philosophy.

Le penseur en songeant fait une découverte:  
Personne n'est coupable.

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Ah! vous voulez qu'on soit responsable? De quoi?  
D'être homme de tel siècle, ou bien fils de tel roi?  
... Est-on donc accusable et sera-t-on puni  
De la place où vous met l'obscur destinée?

What are we to do with the theory of transmigration, and how are we to justify the fury of the "Légende" against those wickedest of all beings, kings and priests, if we once accept the law of fatality?

Ces hommes n'étaient pas pires que d'autres hommes;  
Ce qui fait les Césars, c'est l'air fatal des Romes.

This somewhat vulnerable body of contradictory doctrines constitutes the "new religion" which Hugo offers us in the place of the old. It hardly justifies the scorn which he proclaims for the latter. In one of his latest poems he tells us that every religion is only an embodiment of impotence having wrath for its basis; that priests are only black men vaguely maundering, fakirs in India and divines among us; that dogmas are all false, religions are all mythologies, and that those frightful bags of words called Bibles are only a confused and perverse farrago, in the study of which the poor blinded spirit will no more learn the real than in trying to compose a song out of insulting words. It is vain to carve deities and to rear temples and cathedrals with twin spires:

Dieu voit avec pitié ces deux oreilles d'âne  
Se dresser dans la vaste nuit.

The poet conjures us to deny Olympus and Sinai and to avert our gaze from that strange moon of Calvary, red with the Saviour's blood, to fix them on Reality, on the miracle of gases, forces, magnets, the tenebrous and dazzling infinite. Has he forgotten that, not so many years before, he had described his children reading the Bible:

Dans le texte auguste,  
Leurs cœurs, lisant avec ferveur,  
Puisaient le beau, le vrai, le juste?

How changed,—and may we not add, how fallen—from him who once regretfully recalled the

Jours de piété grave et de force féconde,  
Lorsque la Bible ouverte éblouissait le monde!

The only revelation is the one to which the *terribles ascètes* turn, after rejecting Korans and Bibles, namely, the starry azure. In all this we



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have only another re-incarnation of the romantic chimæra, the return to nature, with the implied rejection of all that man has achieved in his efforts to rise above the naturalistic level, his religions, his polity, and his civilization.

Teutatès, Mahomet, Jésus . . .  
N'arrivent qu'à des cris et qu'à des bégaiements.

From such guides Hugo turns away to the mountains, the sea, and the wildwood, to Guernsey.

Je m'en vais, sinistre, aux lieux inabordables,  
Au bord des mers, au haut des monts, au fond des bois.  
Là, j'entends mieux crier l'âme humaine aux abois;  
Là, je suis pénétré plus avant par l'idée.

It is true, Hugo proposes certain mitigations to this stern naturalism for the more frivolous whose device is:

Donner son cœur au ciel si Goton vous le laisse,

assuring them, in Voltaire's name, that

Baiser le saint chausson qu'offre à la gent dévote  
Le pape, et préférer le pied nu de Javotte,  
Tels sont les vrais instincts d'un sage en bon état.

Yet we ought not to take these concessive moods too seriously, perhaps. Let us return to the *terribles ascètes*. These are the only authentic prophets—priests are but human creations and as such to be sternly suppressed; and they are, moreover, not only ignorant but terribly wicked—witness Borgia, and Pope Pius IX. Yet even the *magi* (among whom Hugo classed himself) would seem to be of doubtful utility,

Ces sages que jamais l'homme, hélas! ne comprit.

Such considerations inspire a certain misgiving. Is it not to be feared that such elusive prophets will hardly suffice for man's transcendental needs? And will not the religion which the poet drives out of the door with his pitchfork fly in again through the open windows of his soul? As he says: "We are forced to have faith. But to have faith does not appease us. Faith has I know not what bizarre need of form. Hence, religions." And why rail so vehemently against these inevitable forms, if, as the poet says: "To espouse as duty a severe error has its grandeur?" The Jehovah "whose majestic nose

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he slaps," surely had at least the advantage of a decorous severity as compared with Hugo's debonair deity:

Que Dieu se fâche de la joie,  
C'est peu probable; et je suis sûr,  
Quand sur nos fronts l'amour flamboie,  
Que quelqu'un sourit dans l'azur.

Quand Lise, au plaisir décidée,  
Drape son burnous nubien,  
Et court au bal, j'ai dans l'idée  
Que l'Infini le prend très bien.

To Hugo in this maudlin mood even atheism, which he at times so violently reprobates, seems the most venial of philosophic sins: If "illustrious and powerful atheists" deny God, what of it? "Being great wits, they prove God." And why should the author of the *Prière pour Tous* denounce all priests so harshly, if, as he once said, it is necessary that some should pray always for those who never pray? Does he not even say elsewhere, with a fervor worthy of the days of Sternhold and Hopkins:

Pensons et vivons à genoux;  
Tâchons d'être sagesse, humilité, lumière;  
Ne faisons point un pas qui n'aille à la prière!

Such are the extremes to which anti-clerical politics will lead even a *mage* writing in the land of Renan, at the very moment when the art of unlocking the religions of the past with the key of sympathy was being carried to such a point of perfection that scepticism itself wore a worshipful air, and Monsieur Homais was become a thing of scorn even among his spiritual brethren! Yet Hugo took so seriously his duty of freeing religion from superstition, of "decaterpillarizing God," as he more poetically puts it, that he is capable of speaking of Moses in this vein: "Where is Moses, the legislator? In the rubbish-heap of dead religions. Where is Moses, the poet? Beside Æschylus." Yet he had once found in Moses the articulate formulation of the vague guesses of Pythagoras:

Pythagore épelle  
Et Moïse lit.

So bitter is Hugo's anti-clericalism that he not only treats Moses in this unhandsome fashion, but the very word Christianity becomes an offense in his nostrils: "In philosophic radicalism, this word Chris-

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tianity is only a drop; in political radicalism, the word king is only a drop; but a drop of arsenic, mingled with the best beverage in the world, renders it difficult to digest."

It is melancholy to reflect that the poet who set out to restore the altar should thus himself have receded farther and farther from it, only to become the planet-struck theosophist and mystagogue of the period of exile and finally, in his old age, the blatant denunciator of priests and kings—"those august false noses that the priest sticks on God's face"—confounding the work of Voltaire with that of Christ, and offering us, as a substitute for Christianity, a new faith from which all that makes religion a vital force, a consolation, or a restraint, is inexplicably omitted.

This is the logical consummation of that application of romanticism to Christianity that was taught to Hugo by Chateaubriand. Take away from Christianity everything that is essential, and what remains? The religion of Chateaubriand—*la religion des cloches*. With him we are still inside of the cathedral with its somber vastness, its dim religious light, its fragrant censers and its awe-inspiring suggestiveness, although no message any longer echoes through its silent spaces: our emotion is æsthetic. Take away the solider portion of this, and what is left? The religion of Hugo—*la religion des flèches*. If we approach the cathedral under his guidance, it is only to remain on the outside. While our cicerone is heroically shaking one fist at the priest, with the other he is sternly compressing his nostrils to shut out the very suspicion of a smell of incense, leaving us free worshipfully to view the structure, to admire its colossal proportions, and to follow with the eye its lofty spires: our emotion is architectural and astronomic. Chateaubriand sought intoxication in the inner void; Hugo found it in the outer void. From the religion of bells he has evolved the religion of belfries. I fear we must finally say of his curious prying into the infinite and their very slight religious fruitage, what he says of the Paul Prys of a more vulgar kind: "There exist beings who, in order to learn the solutions of these enigmas, which at bottom are utterly indifferent to them . . . waste more time and take more trouble than would be needed for ten good acts, and who do this gratuitously, for the pleasure of the thing, with no other pay for their curiosity than their curiosity itself."

But, after all, it may be argued that Hugo's floundering in the quagmire of metaphysical speculation are not much less convincing than the more congruous utterances of those who execute the march

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against the stronghold of ultimate truth with more of gymnastic precision. What matters far more in poetry than unverifiable formulations of unattainable truths is the spirit in which such formulations are made and used, and the freedom of outlook which the speculator achieves from his high watch-tower.

When the intellectual nullity of Hugo's work is deplored, it is not simply the lack of originality in his thought that is in question. The poet of passion and of beauty, who consents to be simply a gifted child singing the charms of what he feels but does not comprehend, may hold a very high though essentially secondary place in the world of poetry. But if the poet repudiates this classification and insists on treating these larger themes, we can not but demand that they be treated with reverence and insight, and not as a loom for the unsanctified imagination to weave its arabesques upon. It is this background of seriousness, which, quite independently of the intellectual powers of the poet, is a reflection of the gravity and sanity of his habitual moods and an index of the nobility of his character, it is this essential element of all poetry that deals with life, that is absent from Hugo's poetry. Chaotic in so many ways, it is above all a spiritual chaos. As there was no final unity in his nature, there could be none in his work. It is always his talent alone that shines. The momentary exigencies of the artist are always the one supreme law in this congeries of lawless caprices. His ideas therefore vary with the *chiaro-oscuro* of his mood, or even of his subject, for often the mood is made to order to fit the matter. His utterance is at the mercy of his theme; it is often the progeny of metaphor married to antithesis. What is truth? says the jesting poet. For him it is only the flash that leaps from tinkling cymbals, or from the brassy compound out of which artistic splendors may be manufactured: gold to the eye, but tinsel to the touch. There is such prevailing disharmony in Hugo's sentiments and opinions that it is a logical impossibility to credit any of them with a deeper significance than attaches to flitting moods; and too often we are compelled to doubt whether the caprice, momentary as it is, had a substantive existence even for that moment, or whether it was only an artistically blown soap-bubble or something more tenuous still, a phantom called into being by the jingle of rhyme or the juggling of imagery.

It is, as we all know, only too possible for the elements of thought and even the principles of conduct to float loosely in our consciousness at the mercy of our moods so that at one moment we think nobly and the next ignobly; but we can not, in that case, escape the feeling



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that our first duty is to bring some order into this chaos and to grasp at some conviction to which we can give our allegiance—if nothing more, at least fidelity to our doubt and sincerity in our scepticism. Hugo, however, is as dogmatic as he is contradictory in his utterances on religion and morals. He proclaims again and again throughout his life his firm faith in certain primary truths, and again and again he enounces doctrines utterly incompatible with these truths. We may float between faith and scepticism, between convention and idiosyncrasy, between a stoical and an epicurean attitude toward life, but until we have chosen or at least mediated between them, we can not with good grace set up as moral teachers—or prophets—and after we have ceased drifting, we can not ignore the fact that the inter-relations of these modes of thought are fewer and less profound than their exclusions. When Hugo says:

Ma vie entre déjà dans l'ombre de la mort,  
Et je commence à voir le grand côté des choses,

we have a right to be shocked if he illustrates this seriousness that comes with hoary eld and sage experience by intoning the "Chansons des Rues et des Bois," or by writing the "Théâtre en Liberté" in honor of what Arnold called "the great goddess Lubricity." When, not yet turned of thirty, he virtuously inveighs against

La valse impure au vol lascif et circulaire,

we are ourselves hardly equal to such premature severity. But we are, on the other hand, equally perplexed when the poet, well past sixty, tells us of his innumerable conquests in the realm of the grisettes:

. . . sous ces berceaux,  
Après avoir été deux anges,  
Nous n'étions plus que deux oiseaux.

And again, when Hugo asserts that he sees the light through the holes in the hands of Jesus Christ, must we not cherish serious misgivings if we find that this light serves chiefly to aureole the head of Lisette?

Since Hugo's interest in religion is at best inspired by a purely metaphysical curiosity, it follows that religion does not appeal to him as primarily a guide to right living. In the very superficial interest that he takes in its moral implications, he is a true *Gaulois*. He is one of the great family of French writers, Rabelais, Montaigne,

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Molière, Voltaire, Balzac, who represent the Gallic tradition, who accept only so much of morality as readily allies itself with a utilitarian conception of life, so much as is demonstrable by logic and reducible to formulas. They have little sympathy for the purely personal aspects of morality, for those that concern the individual rather than society, and that seek a mystic sanction in religion. They relish some of the fruits of morality, but they neglect its roots. They preach a *morale des honnêtes gens*. When this rises to religious ecstasy, it too often pours out libations of Bordeaux and Vin d'Aï in honor of the *Dieu des bonnes gens*. The precepts of this morality and the tenets of this religion are naturally of the simplest and the least austere.

This type of morality is radically unpoetical in most of its aspects, highly poetical in none. Hugo was too much an artist not to feel this instinctively. His imaginative moods therefore contradict his temperamental ones, and, when superficially read, he often passes for the prophet and the seer whose austere language he is so irresponsibly aping with grandiose attitudes and magnified sonority. Imaginatively he walks with Christ and Isaiah in the lonely wilderness; temperamentally he threads the back streets, an *anse à panier* between Turlurette and Rosita-Rosa. In Hugo's case, the poet was born, the prophet was manufactured. He is a Parisian touring Israel. When he utters his oracles, the gallery may applaud, but the balcony smiles discreetly. "I feel in all this a hint of insincerity," says Jules Lemaitre. "A nineteenth century bourgeois, who constantly vaticinates after the fashion of Isaiah or Ezechiel as if he dwelt in the desert and ate grasshoppers and really carried on conversations with God on the mountain-top, seems to me as absurd and false as a seventeenth century bourgeois imitating the delirium of Pindar." If we make the life a commentary on the work, and nothing could be more legitimate here, we find no medium in which the ideal, about which Hugo was so fond of declaiming, could flourish. He lived a worldly and superficial life into which the worship of perfection or even the pursuit of self-culture never entered. He was devoted entirely to his

Songes de grandeur et de gloire.

Yet no poet ever set up so persistently as a teacher of mankind. He not only brings with him a new religion, but, like Wells, and Shaw, and Moore, and other great lights of contemporary literature, a new morality likewise. He moralizes more pertinaciously than any other

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poet, even Wordsworth. For, strange as it may seem, virtue was perennially attractive to this epicurean and pagan singer. It ever had for him one charm which was peculiarly its own, that of novelty and remoteness. Accordingly, while claiming for the poet of genius a priesthood and pontificate, and while seeing in him the sole guide of mankind, the enemy of all wrong and all vice, he at the same time proclaims the omnipotence of the senses even on the level of the carnal appetites.

Le printemps est un tendre et farouche mystère;  
On sent flotter dans l'air la faute involontaire  
Qui se pose, au doux bruit du vent et du ruisseau,  
Dans les âmes ainsi que dans les bois l'oiseau.

The moralist in Hugo, like Molière's Maître Jacques, wears two coats and fills two functions; he is interchangeably the austere puritan and the easy-going epicurean. When he plays the part of the budge doctor of the stoic fur, he eloquently repeats all the sound and severe maxims of conduct that the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker rehearse to their offspring on Sundays; in the contrary mood he views life like a Byronic æsthete, who believes that youth and love are the only normal delights in a world where all things are vanity.

As a stoic he says that the object of man on earth is not happiness but duty.

As an epicurean he says (in the same volume): "At the present time, the irresistible union of two hearts (he is thinking of Juliette—or Mme. Biard—or Blanche) is persecuted by the law; yet what is this union if not marriage?"

As a stoic he says, in the preface to his play "Angelo," that the theatre has replaced the church—but no matter, the poet is a priest and has *charge d'âmes*.

As an epicurean he, in the play itself, opposes the courtesan to the wife, all the advantages of the comparison falling to the former, and presently we divine that the wife is his wife, and the courtesan is his Juliette.

As a stoic he says: "To enjoy! what a sorry desire! what a paltry ambition! The brute enjoys. To think, that is the real triumph of the soul."

As an epicurean he says:

Le fond de la nature est un immense hymen,  
J'en veux ma part.

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As a stoic he reproaches Anacreon, Horace, even Virgil himself, with writing *des poésies monstrueuses* characterized by the absence of chastity in love. "It is difficult to express more ingeniously what the brutes feel," he adds dourly.

As an epicurean, when age and wisdom have tempered his youthful ardor for virtue, he consoles Baudelaire, whose "Fleurs du Mal" had been legally condemned for their immorality, and he sees in the condemnation a crown of glory.

As a stoic he provokes Renouvier to see in him "the great Dreamer always pursuing the most exalted moral ideal."

As an epicurean he provokes Brunetière to see in him a cynical old satyr and a restorer of the cult of Priapus.

The moral reflections which Hugo draws from the spectacle of life are of the most everyday kind, always grandly unqualified by unworthy concessions and timorous restrictions. There is not a spiritual-minded costermonger or a meditative stevedore who would not hail them with assenting delight as profound truths—having himself cognized every one of them through the interstitial loopholes which even grinding toil leaves open to the high-tides of that great sea of philosophic thought whose waves are for ever breaking against the frail dykes of our temporal being, and occasionally splashing over the top. Hugo's poetry is full of these splashes.

He persistently reiterates great laws of life such as these: "Love unites; love uplifts; death separates; genius is sublime (I am a genius); liberty is a great blessing; man is petty (barring exceptions), but God is great; an honest man's the noblest work of God (I, Hugo, am a very honest man); death is the end, perhaps it is also the beginning; God is love; Love is a God." These great truths doubtless constituted all the "ideal" that man emerging from the stone-age, or even the Parisian shopkeeper of Hugo's day, ever demanded in his most transcendental moods; but they might almost seem a trifle innutritious were not their meagerness so splendidly dissimulated. But in what magnificent style they are served up! We are almost inevitably beguiled by the golden platters, the heady fumes, the royal garnishings, and the multiform sauces to believe that we are partaking of a splendid feast—and we vaguely wonder why it is that we invariably come away hungry.

Hugo has done into rhyme all the moralities which Abel believed and which Cain rejected; he has lauded honesty, chastity (all Gallic poets do not) and poverty; he has upheld (theoretically) beneficence;



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has eulogized indiscriminately Napoleon, Voltaire, Marat, and (with some reservations) Jesus, and has proclaimed the holiness of the French Revolution (especially the Terror, in which he contrived even to see "an act of God"). He declaimed all his life about liberty, equality, and fraternity, and he said some very eloquent things about the last, which lies easily within the range of the imaginative sentimentalist. Not that he is even here a safe guide, or that he escapes the contradictions that beset every suitor who woos humanity in general. In his benignant universality he strangely overlooks the merciless aristocracy of Nature, who decrees that we can not be the brothers of those who are not born into the same family, and who also decrees that there shall be an even wider gulf of separation between a Victor Hugo and the Vacqueries and Barbous who burn incense to him, than there is between them and that humbler relative, the donkey, whom Hugo so loved, or that still humbler brother whom he so indignantly disclaimed when inducted into his presence by Darwin. It may be unhumanitarian, but Dame Nature is, I am sure, on the side of those who refuse to accord to the *forçats* and *prostituées* and others of Hugo's cherished clients any nearer claim to kinship than that of *cousins à la mode de Bretagne*. Moreover, the friend of the whole human race is apt to exclude his immediate neighbors from the all-encircling catholicity of his embrace; indeed, as Anatole France says, as soon as one is penetrated with the sentiment of the brotherhood of man he demands the fall of ten thousand heads.

Is Hugo a pacifist? He denounces war a thousand times, but he sings Napoleon and his battles in a hundred poems. At one moment he repudiates the martial strains of Homer:

Homère était jadis le poète . . .  
La Muse est aujourd'hui la Paix . . .

But, in a different mood, he says:

Enseignons à nos fils à creuser des tranchées,  
A charger des fusils, à rouler des canons,  
A combattre, à mourir, et lisons-leur Homère!

And both passages appear in the same volume!

Is Hugo international and cosmopolitan? He proclaims his solidarity with the whole human race at every turn, but in 1871 he writes:

Plus de nations sœurs! . . .  
Mettons-les (the Germans) sous nos pieds, puis tendons-leur la main!  
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In 1867, Hugo was still preaching the fraternity of all men and the brotherhood of all nations, having apparently renounced his earlier project of tossing England into the Atlantic and Russia across the Urals; but in 1871 it is Germany that forces him to be unbrotherly—and he exclaims:

Mais l'amour devient haine en présence du mal,

a verse which carries the naïve implication that the poet expected all nations to turn saints before founding the brotherhood of man. On those terms, perhaps, the theory will find no sceptics. One is reminded of Sardou's conditional assent to Hugo's favorite doctrine, the abolition of the death-penalty: "Certainement, mais que messieurs les assassins commencent!" Even without provocation, Hugo's fraternal spirit is liable to suffer occasional crooked eclipses. In his table-talk he used to advocate the forcible annexation of Belgium on the ground that it is, by geographical propriety, a virtual department of France, and because small states are, in any case, natural appendages of their more powerful neighbors—a style of argument that has a strangely contemporary ring. Evidently for Hugo, as for most of us, the theory of fraternity maintained itself up to the point of practice *exclusivement*. As for liberty and equality, about which it is impossible to speak intelligently without making some sharp intellectual distinctions, Hugo has said little that is not false, less that is not Utopian, and nothing that is illuminating. Hence his great vogue with the masses. He is, as Faguet calls him, the moralist of the third estate. He has crystallized into the absolute form which the populace demands some of the more apprehensible half-truths which the past has bequeathed to us. And, as Taine says, no truth becomes largely operative until it has been translated into a superstition. It was Hugo's special mission to translate into superstitions the half-truths of the French Revolution, its humanitarianism, its religion of progress, its hatred of tradition, and its patriotic militarism. This is the secret of his wider popularity. For the man of vulgar understanding, Hugo seems, and indeed is, something far different from a mere poet like Homer or Shakespeare; for him he is the great authentic prophet of that dearest of popular idols, the commonplace; and for him "Les Misérables" is a fifth Gospel, replacing all that has been outgrown in the other four.

Romantic poetry owes much of its richness, and not a little of its profundity, to the fusion,—and why not say to the confusion?—of

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man and nature. For the classic poet, as for the Renaissance painter, nature was only a vanishing background, against which stood out, magnified and absolutely dominant, the human figure. What was for this older art only a rich framework has in ours become a part of the picture.

Our modern poetry has been somewhat lacking in fine discrimination. In place of the old danger of making man too much a God, and God too much a man, has arisen the danger, which science has helped so much to intensify, of confusing the downward bonds between man and nature. It should be the noblest function of poetry to maintain the old distinctions against the threatening encroachments of science and of romantic naturalism and to encourage us to continue with Kant to admire the moral law as much as the starry heavens. Yet poetry of the purely romantic type lives by blending man and nature, just as morality lives by sharply discriminating them.

Poetry in its evolution, in spite of sharp downward dips, has steadily tended toward an ever greater refinement: it has more and more merged and translated the phenomenal into the symbolic and the spiritual. Yet here comes Hugo, a poet of the eleventh hour, who remains fundamentally foreign to this whole development and obstinately primitive in his attitude toward the universe, who accepts it joyously as a whole, in its beauty and in its ugliness, not, as we do, parcelled and assorted to our taste and our needs. He identifies nature with what is above nature; he substitutes materialization for spiritualization in art, and instinctively translates every human emotion and thought into some purely naturalistic equivalent. This is an interesting and striking literary phenomenon, all the more so in view of Hugo's unique power and fertility; but, for all that, we must face the fact that this corrupt romantic primitivism which renders concrete even what is essentially abstract, which empties of their spiritual content the very things which man, in proportion as he has grown civilized, has always rendered more subtly supersensuous, this sinking of humanity back into nature, is fundamentally hostile to art as well as to morality—and exactly in proportion as it tends to divorce them from one another. The primitivism of Hugo is parent to the animalism of Zola and the naturalistic group.

We represent to ourselves a poet like Dante by means of a whole vocabulary of words heavily charged with abstract suggestiveness; not so Hugo. Lo! the poor poet with untutored mind sees Dante in mountains, trees, and lions! He pictures him as a man with shining,

deep, wild eyes, who says: "I was once a mountain, then a weird Druidic oak, then a dreaming lion in the desert; now, I am a man and am called Dante." Such a conception is primitive to the point of being mythologic, and, intellectually considered, is the very sublime of impotence. The myriad-minded Shakespeare Hugo sees in the same fashion as a sort of monstrous being, *pâle, farouche, fauve*, at whose step the wildwood shudders, shaking like a mane a *baillon de lumière* over a head transparent and all aglow within. He is a giant who tames Richard III the leopard, and Caliban the mastodon; his monstrous subjects, Lear, Brutus, Hamlet, *êtres énormes*, lie around him overcome, with the death-rattle in their throats, while sinister, clutching in his hands fragments of human souls, the flesh of Othello, the remains of Macbeth, he reposes in his work, *du drame effrayant alphabet* (the discreet will draw the obvious inference), like the black lion of the jungle, who falls asleep in his vast cavern, his claws dripping with blood.

The poet who thus unduly magnifies nature degrades man. He does so, not only by such primitive contempt for the claims and the conquests of intellect and reason, but still more by the insidious tendency to deify the natural man that still lurks within the civilized man. This leads straight to the romantic gospel of the return to nature, to the exaltation of the savage, the free child of nature, above the townsman, to the recognition of nature's sanction behind her imperious instincts, to a deep-rooted hatred for the traditions of order and discipline which man has slowly matured through the ages, and which he has embodied in religions, laws, and social institutions.

All these aberrations we shall find in Hugo. It is true that we shall find their opposites also, for he was not in any degree a logician, like some of his romantic fellows or predecessors. But the elements of this subversive primitivism are bound together by a chain much more coercive than that of mere logic. They imply one another not alone logically but in actuality. They are not, in Hugo, an artificially elaborated system of ideas—everything of that sort is, in so feeble a thinker, quite negligible—but they are bred in the bone. We find in Hugo an essentially revolutionary and anarchic poet. He scorns all rules and limitations; he denies criticism; he rejects discipline and established order in life and in literature; he substitutes for all this the spontaneous inspiration of instinct: he sees in love the voice of the senses and in the senses the voice of nature, the marriage institution thus becoming a nullity as a social basis; he sees in all organized religions



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and in their priesthoods and their bibles only crafty dupery; in the social structure and in the safeguards of the law only entrenched injustice; in education only foolish restraint; in science only vain pretension. He is not simply a primitive poet, but in the name of primitivism sets himself up as the advocate of a revolutionary and dissolvent utopianism. He is fundamentally an uncivilized poet.

Religion has always insisted on the corruption of the human heart in the natural state; romantic naturalism proclaimed its belief in the native goodness of man. Hugo, along with the extreme wing of the romanticists, has, with the mad logic of Rousseau, alternately deified and calumniated human nature. Man, individually, as a child of nature, is radically good; man, corporately, as a citizen and a member of society, is radically bad. Absorbed in his conclusions to the neglect of his premises, Hugo, like Rousseau, thus comes to see man, now as an angel, now as a devil. That much abused abstraction, Society, the chief school of virtue, is pictured as a school of vice precisely in proportion as it is differentiated from that other much abused abstraction, Nature, that chief school of vice, which becomes a school of virtue. At this point, by a neat turn of logical prestidigitation, for nature, the equivalent of untrained instinct, the poet whisks under our eyes a totally different nature, made up of flowers, trees, solitude, sheep and shepherds. It is the oaks and elms that are the true prophets and the lilies and roses that are the true apostles:

Your voiceless lips, O flowers, are living preachers,  
Each cup a pulpit, every leaf a book,

to quote an English echo of the same doctrine.

Les cathedrales sont belles  
Et hautes sous le ciel bleu;  
Mais le nid des hirondelles  
Est l'édifice de Dieu.

The dog and the donkey, being still very near to nature, are also privileged possessors of light,

Mon chien voit Dieu.

Nor is humanity wholly excluded. Peasants and shepherds, beggars too, and poets, that is, such of them as wander assiduously among the beauties of nature, achieve something of her sanctity; but men who walk the streets of cities are all threatened with unnamable perversion by that mysterious something, Society.

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"There is an abysmal difference between the poacher or smuggler and the hideous assassin that is met in the city. The poacher lives in the forest, the smuggler lives on the mountain or on the sea. Cities make men ferocious, because they make them corrupt. The mountain, the sea, the forest make wild men, they develop the anti-social side, but often without destroying the human side."<sup>1</sup>

Hugo's most ideal creation (with the possible exception of Bishop Myriel) is Gilliatt, in the "*Travailleurs de la Mer*," who has lived in absolute solitude without any form of social restraint, a pure child of nature, a Casper Hauser of the sea. He is, of course, a sort of inarticulate Christ.

Hugo, however, contradicts himself with the most imperturbable equanimity:

—J'étais enfant, j'étais petit, j'étais cruel:—  
Tout homme sur la terre, où l'âme erre asservie,  
Peut commencer ainsi le récit de sa vie.

Tout homme naît bon, pur, généreux, juste, probe,  
Tendre, et toute âme éclôt étoile aux mains de Dieu.

Nous bons! Nous fraternels! ô fange et pourriture!

When he goes on to say that he finds

L'orgueil chez les puissants et chez les misérables,  
La haine au cœur de tous,

and when he concludes

Le meilleur n'est pas bon;

may we not rejoin in his own words

Les hommes sont meilleurs, ami, que tu ne crois?

—and in his own case, at least, we do not lack testimonials from himself to back up our protest.

Few novelists have ever been quite so severe in their judgment of human nature as Hugo when he asserts that all the good done by the

<sup>1</sup> The reader who takes this nonsense seriously enough may turn to Hugo's volume on Paris to learn that this city is after all the umbilical centre of the world and to find Hugo subscribing to Mascarille's dictum: *Hors de Paris il n'y a pas de salut pour les honnêtes gens.*

This glorification of Paris runs all through "*Les Misérables*." Other cities may corrupt—*Exceptons Paris pourtant.* The Paris gamin, that "cherub of the gutter," is at heart almost intact. The same is true of the faubourien. *Respirer Paris, cela conserve l'âme.*

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philanthropic Jean Valjean was forgotten in less than two hours after his downfall, and that in the whole town which he had redeemed to prosperity and happiness only three or four persons remained faithful to his memory. It is true that, when white instead of black is the appropriate color, it is lavished quite as freely. *Æsthetics* dominate, and a damnatory mood is imposed upon the poet to-day, not by experience but by a rhyme, and an encomiastic one to-morrow, not by insight but by antithesis. "There is no credit due to a rhetorician's account either of good or evil," as Johnson remarks. The antithesis of light and shade requires that the satisfaction thus found should alternate with darker moods inspired by the world around him.

Tous laissent quelque chose aux buissons de la route,  
Les troupeaux leur toison et l'homme sa vertu.

This discouraging note, so common in Hugo's work, rises from the protestive clash of a chaotic naturalism against something higher than itself, from the dismay of a crudely romantic primitivism at variance with august laws which it fears more than understands. The strains which this protest inspires are, for so energetic a personality as Hugo's, curiously lacking in virility. During the greater part of his literary career, his temperamental optimism, so rampant in his old age, is thus veiled in gloom, the surface moods predominating over the fundamental one in a world where reality refuses to conform to romantic exigencies, and where the spirit of man refuses to be divine by birth-right and only rises above its natural animal state through the slow purgation of experience.

Il suffit pour pleurer de songer qu'ici-bas  
Tout miel est amer, tout ciel sombre,  
Que toute ambition trompe l'effort humain,  
Que l'espoir est un leurre.

Such verse is as dispiriting as a drizzly day. Perhaps it is wise to remember that in those romantic times this customary suit of solemn black was the only wear—and sometimes encased the frames of well-fed poets upon whom life was discharging a not wholly unrelished cornucopia of material and spiritual joys. It is consoling to reflect that Hugo probably wrote these verses while seated near the cheerful hearth, his feet ensconced in comfortable *babouches*, his fond Adele at hand to wait on him, a trio of rosy-cheeked cherubs dancing and frolicking as near as the jealous muse would allow, and—rare felicity for a poet—the golden harvest of *Hernani* jingling in his pocket.

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Under such propitious circumstances, it is easy and pleasant, even for so essentially masculine a spirit as Hugo's, to indulge in becoming glooms and lady-like despairs. Did not Prince Arthur remember how, when he was in France,

Young gentlemen would be as sad as night,  
Only for wantonness?

The example of Byron had recalled this antique fashion and given it unprecedented vogue among the young gentlemen of 1830.

In this manner the poet oscillates between unreconciled extremes, between roseate visions of the future, and inky visions of the past, and visions of the present in which both colors fuse and overlap in puzzling promiscuity.

Ce siècle est grand et fort; un noble instinct le mène,  
Partout on voit marcher l'idée en mission.

Thus he sings one day, but on the morrow the burden of his song is:

Quelle vie! Et quel siècle alentour!—Vertu, gloire,  
Pouvoir, génie et foi, tout ce qu'il faudrait croire  
Est traîné sur la claie et suivi dans la rue  
Par le rire en haillons.

It is true the despair is dated March 1837, and the optimism April 1837—and a virtuoso may have many moods in the space of a changing moon, and may sing them all by turns. *Amant alterna Camenæ*. When real feeling intervenes for once and the poet speaks out of a heavy heart, how utterly he is at the mercy of his black mood, how unprovided with any of the wisdom that the genuine moralist has in his store! The poet who had said

Un invisible doigt caressant se promène  
Sous chacun des chaînons de la misère humaine,

now says

Dans ce baigne terrestre où ne s'ouvre aucune aile,  
Sans me plaindre [!], saignant, et tombant sur les mains,  
Morne, épuisé, raillé par les forçats humains,  
J'ai porté mon chaînon de la chaîne éternelle.

How he lavishes his black pigments and his characteristic heavy touch! What lack of sanity and lucidity in this frightful picture of life! It is the raving of an irresponsible romanticist without insight and without wisdom. It is only querulous morbidity, romantic pessimism,



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darkness extended outward from the poet's self to the universe, having at best only the dolorous pathos that attaches to all forms of madness. Nothing could be more remote from the manly disillusion, solemn as Greek tragedy, that sometimes finds voice in truly philosophic verse, as in Gray's noble lines:

Man's feeble race what ills await!  
Labor and Penury, the racks of pain,  
Disease and Sorrow's weeping train,  
And Death, sad refuge from the storms of Fate.

Here the darkness is cast on the poet's spirit by a sorrow-laden world, and instead of being the wilful dramatization of a merely personal woe, it has the dignity and the grandeur that belong to the vision of an unchanging law embracing all human things.

Happily, in Hugo the hopeful mood ultimately prevails, and the vices which so darkly disfigure human nature will, it seems, all disappear one day—the moment that a good flying-machine is invented.

"It remains only to solve in some manner this problem, and it will be solved, and do you know what will happen then? On the instant all frontiers will vanish . . . fanaticism will die out, oppression will become an impossibility . . . there will be no more hatred, no more wars; a sort of new life, woven of concord and of light, will uphold and appease the world; the fraternity of races will annihilate space and commune in the eternal azure; all men will mingle in the skies."

In its more constructive moods romanticism made nature its oracle. The eighteenth century *philosophes* were on the whole the apologists of instinct; the nineteenth century poets were its apostles. They found recondite virtues in primitivism and wrapped themselves in shining garments of sophistication. They preached the return to nature over glasses of absinthe on the iron tables of the boulevard-café, and proclaimed the emancipation of love and the pastoral charms of innocence loitering in field and grove, on the sixth floor of Parisian lodging-houses, finding consenting converts and practitioners in the grisettes and other children of nature who haunt those austere solitudes. In this unlovely world of French drinks, French religion, and French manners, in this *hortus seclusus* of French romanticism, the muse of Hugo is very much at home. There was nothing in his temperament, as there was nothing in his life, that rose above it.

How completely Hugo shared the romantic hostility towards the institution of marriage, his practice sufficiently proves. The antinomy be-

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tween love and marriage, so prolific of discomfort to the true Gaul, was one he could not escape. That we can not have too much of love or too little of marriage is an almost universally current doctrine of the unwritten romantic code, and from it Hugo could hardly have had the bold originality to dissent. Finding in nature sufficient sanction both for freedom and for love, he readily arrives at the modern theory of free-love. "It is strange," he argues, "that the liberty of the mind has been established, but not that of the heart. To love is as much a right of man as to think. Adultery is only a sort of heresy. If liberty of conscience has a right to exist, it is surely here."

La foule hait cet homme et proscriit cette femme;  
Ils sont maudits. Quel est leur crime? Ils ont aimé.

Occasional utterances of this kind, and in his plays and novels an occasional courtesan or murderess restored to virginity or virtue, or both, by such love as they can give or get, suffice to prove Hugo's hostility to conventional morality. On the subject of love Hugo assuredly does not moralize with decorum and nobility. Yet so bold a genius as his is not to be discouraged from attempting this also at times. We are therefore in some danger of being the dupes of literary artifice if we take too seriously in his poetry the occasional strains that do seem to rise above a vulgar naturalism, the passages in which he professes to moralize with decorum and nobility. The solemn Hugo rhymes bourgeois moralities of indubitable pith and moment.

Oh! par nos vils plaisirs, nos appétits, nos fanges,  
Que de fois nous devons vous attrister, archanges! . . .  
Quand, pâmé, dans un nimbe ou bien dans un éclair,  
On tend sa bouche ardente aux coupes de la chair,  
A l'heure où l'on s'enivre, aux lèvres d'une femme,  
De ce qu'on croit l'amour, de ce qu'on prend pour l'âme,  
Sang du cœur, vin des sens âcre et délicieux,  
On fait rougir là-haut quelque passant des cieux.

A certain intemperance of expression in the lines might perhaps suggest to the observant reader that the temperamental depths still lie uncooled under this surface layer of snow-white morality that has momentarily hidden them. And indeed, the temperature has only to rise a little to uncover them once more.

Car on ne peut à l'heure où les sens sont en feu  
Etreindre la beauté sans croire embrasser Dieu.

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That is the true temperamental note. It is in vain that the painter of Josiane austere warns us:

La femme nue, ayant les hanches découvertes,  
Chair qui tente l'esprit, rit sous les feuilles vertes;  
N'allons pas rire à son côté.

We can not be really persuaded that we have at last hit upon that *rara avis*, a puritan Frenchman, for we have again only to turn a few leaves to find the singer of *La Fête chez Thérèse* making most unedifying avowals:

Je vis venir à moi, dans les grands roseaux verts,  
La belle fille heureuse, effarée et sauvage,  
Ses cheveux dans ses yeux, et riant à travers.

And finally, when the years that bring the philosophic mind come at last to give double weight to his utterances, these seem to fall with preponderant heaviness in the naturalistic pan of his scales, for the poet, speaking with all the authority that sixty years of experience confer, tells us that Sinai does not exclude Cythæron, and that

Quoiqu'un mage austère et grave soit dedans,  
L'autre n'empêche pas les nymphes d'être nues.

Hugo is therefore not serious when he says:

L'amour est charmant, pur et mortel; n'y crois pas.

But he is really serious when he says:

Le lys est pur, le ciel est bleu, l'amour est doux,  
Sans la permission de l'homme; nul système  
N'empêche Églé de dire à Tityre: Je t'aime!  
La Sorbonne n'a rien à voir dans tout cela.

And he is ultra-serious when he says:

Aimez donc, car tout le proclame,  
Car l'esprit seul éclaire peu,  
Et souvent le cœur d'une femme  
Est l'explication de Dieu.

We have here something remote enough from austere morality—we have the two aspects of the romantic theory of love, its fatality and its sacredness. Both ideas pervade Hugo's work. In his plays and novels love is always a mysterious and fatal passion in whose grasp the individual preëlected for salvation is helplessly lifted heaven-

ward. Hugo's disappointed lovers, it is true, usually seek refuge in suicide, this being, according to the ethics of romanticism, the proper and normal escape from the plain prose of life robbed of this sovereign balm. In any case, love always transforms and even transfigures those who come under its sway. Hugo is unwilling to accept the unromantic fact that love is noble or ignoble according as it blossoms in a noble or ignoble nature. His plays especially are full of lovers who link this one virtue with a thousand crimes, and whom he asks us to accept and absolve in its name. Above all he is prone to see love rise into virtue in the soul of the courtesan.

Cette fange d'ailleurs contient l'eau pure encore:  
 Pour que la goutte d'eau sorte de la poussière,  
 Et redevienne perle en sa splendeur première,  
 Il suffit, c'est ainsi que tout remonte au jour,  
 D'un rayon de soleil ou d'un rayon d'amour!

We have here one of Hugo's favorite moral theories, and one which affords a fair measure of the shallowness of his whole conception of virtue. Dismissing the sunbeam as a rhetorical one, what can we say of this strange renaissance of purity in the fires of passion? Obviously, no laws prevail here save the laws of romance, and no morality more august than the morality of the footlights. Sin and repentance,—the words have a strangely unfashionable ring nowadays—are notions utterly unsympathetic to Hugo. The moral beauty of the early portion of "*Les Misérables*" is unique in his work, and one may well suspect its significance to be therefore only poetical after all. And even there, the religion of Hugo's good bishop is at bottom only a glorified humanitarianism: "*Love one another*," he declared that complete, he desired nothing further; that was his whole doctrine." The bishop, Hugo adds, eschewed all the theological problems, including good and evil, and conscience. This is to omit what is the very foundation of religion; the humanitarianism of Abou Ben Adhem is not religion. It is a part of its fruitage, but is not its root. However, the grotesque moral doctrines embodied in Hugo's plays, and which reappear at every turn in his novels, even in "*Les Misérables*," are far more truly representative than the more composite religiosity expounded in the opening chapters of his great romance. Hugo's life-long faith was that love, not necessarily for mankind in general, but for some one man or woman in particular, is sufficient to ensure salvation. It is in the name of the rehabilitating power of passion that he formulates the precept



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Oh! n'insultez jamais une femme qui tombe!

And it seems sometimes as if this preliminary fall were the one infallible recipe for securing his respect. In the "Légende" he puts these words into the mouth of his uncle, the wounded soldier cared for by a sister of charity:

Elle arracha sa guimpe et fit de la charpie.  
Tout entière à ses soins pour le jeune inconnu,  
Elle ne voyait pas que son sein était nu.  
Moi, je rouvrais les yeux . . . O muses de Sicile!  
Dire à quoi je pensais, ce serait difficile.

Unless the reader share the alleged difficulty, he will probably feel that, now as in Voltaire's day, the glory of expressing moral ideas in verse is one that belongs rather to the English muse.

Of all these solemn matters, Hugo, in his usual mood, speaks with the careless immunity of the pure artist who works with equal zest in the most diverse materials, if only he find them plastic and conducive to his ends. He pictured the human procession as it passed in multi-colored array before his eyes, and he felt, rightly enough, that the rich series of pictures he made would be most fittingly strung on a thread of moral philosophy. Not fundamentally serious, like Wordsworth, he can not be accused of being more concerned with the strength of the string than with the quality of the pictures. His subjects are only incidentally moral; the treatment is essentially romantic, and the distribution of light and shade is dictated by the exigencies of romance. The moral effluvium of the subject hovers like an ornamental cloud in the sky overarching the picture, evanescent and unsubstantial. What could be less moral—or more picturesque—than Hugo's drama? or his novels? Presenting the moral elements only in their picturesque contours and groupings, Hugo has no real concern with their healing or their poisonous ingredients; and when the demands or the caprices of art put the task upon him, he displays as little skill as he does interest in disengaging them. His moral ideas are therefore singularly unauthoritative. It is usually the ultra-romantic or else the popular and universally demanded moral that he presents—though, if some austere inspiration appeal to his artistic instinct, he has no compunctions about enouncing it just as dogmatically. Hence the curious jumble in his work of all the conflicting systems of thought, the juxtaposition cheek by jowl of glowing enthusiasm and of Byronic glooms, of conjugal and extra-conjugal inspirations, of elegies

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at the tomb of his dead child alongside of ecstasies at the shrine of his mistress, of devotional strains interspersed with lays celebrating the free and easy charms of Lise and Jeanneton.

Thus we are reminded again and again that we are listening to a rhetorician and not to a moralist. Hugo sees human nature only in unnatural enlargement; he applies the perspective of the stage to the realities of life, and makes moral greatness scenic, a matter of pose and gesture. This reduction of spiritual things to the categories of material picturesqueness is as destructive of their dignity as it is of their significance. The emphasis is transferred from the inner to the outer:

Saint Jean frissonne: au fond de sa sombre poitrine,  
L'Apocalypse horrible agite son tocsin.  
Eschyle! Oreste marche et rugit dans ton sein,  
Et c'est, ô noir poète à la lèvre irritée!  
Sur ton crâne géant qu'est cloué Prométhée.

When he is in this wild vein, Hugo can make Bombastes Furioso himself seem culpably tame.

Nothing could be more striking as a revelation of the incurable picturesqueness of the would-be moralist, and also of his inadequacy, than the well-known lines in which the demon of rhetoric lured him into defining his mission. After touching, with all the modesty at his command, on the things which he has accomplished, Hugo compares the world to a criminal court where the weak and the wicked are indiscriminately arraigned (though, like most humanitarian romanticists, he himself does his best to obliterate such discriminations between good and evil as we have established, by completely confusing our standards). His rôle as a poet has been that of special pleader for the weak, and the clients whom he has rehabilitated are the court-fool, the comedian, the lackey, and the courtesan. The case of the court-fool, especially, may seem a not very urgent one in the nineteenth century, and some of the other clients might strike the genuine moralist as more in need of redemption than of rehabilitation. The genuine moralist would have selected a very different set of clients, far more deserving but infinitely less picturesque. He would, in other words, refuse to take the court-fool, the comedian, the lackey, and the courtesan seriously—and can we be quite sure that Hugo did? As regards the lackey, at least, in one of those unguarded moments so frequent with him, he speaks with a reprobation so severe and a misplaced moral fury so savage that one is tempted in turn to

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plead the outcast's case against the author of *Ruy Blas*. An old soldier, who had embraced the pacific employment of brushing coats instead of the nobler one of spitting their wearers, a veteran turned valet (to call him by his name), provokes the amazing verse:

*L'homme arrive où jamais n'arriverait la brute!*

This surely is to view morality from a super-æsthetic angle! And does Hugo, even in his best moods and in his best verse, do anything very different? Take a passage which represents him in his finest mood:

Ceux qui vivent ce sont ceux qui luttent; ce sont  
Ceux dont un dessein ferme emplît l'âme et le front,  
Ceux qui d'un haut dessein gravissent l'âpre cime,  
Ceux qui marchent pensifs, épris d'un but sublime,  
Ayant devant les yeux sans cesse, nuit et jour,  
Ou quelque saint labeur, ou quelque grand amour.

Does not the spectacular, even here, predominate over the reflective? And is not the thought, as well as the expression of the thought, the product of a poet who is very much an artist—and very little a moralist? It is put with warmth and even eloquence, it is splendidly polished; but in order to take this high polish it has been shaped in the hard, metallic mould of Hugo's magnificent rhetoric. Its emphatic eloquence is precisely of a kind to invalidate it as moralizing, though it is the frequent bursts of this kind of sonorous commonplace that have contributed as much as anything to create the fallacy that Hugo is a moralist. The current coin of popular moral eloquence has always been minted from this not very precious metallic compound. "Hugo's work, if less banal—or, if the reader prefer, less accessible to all—would not be ensured against the assaults of time, precisely by what it contains of eloquent or of splendid banalities," says Brunetière. The commonplaces of morality put to a marching tune, that is what the average man understands without effort and enjoys without misgiving. But this effortless and uninquiring acceptance implies no new insight and no enlarged conception of man's duties or of his limitations. Such eloquence leaves us to act as much in the dark as before, with quite the same propensity to misdirect our action and waste it on questionable ends—on the rehabilitation of court-fools, comedians, and courtesans, for example.

Of the insight which renders moral vision more penetrating by revealing the ultimate meaning of life to our calmer and more un-

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clouded moods and which makes it impossible for these again to fall back into the old obscurity, of this Hugo has nothing and can give nothing. When the demands of a purely æsthetic rhetoric impose on him a moral mood, he can give it utterance in trumpet tones, but he can neither explain, nor understand, nor does he even sincerely feel, the mood that he is versifying.

He is, consequently, far more effective, even as a moralist, when he speaks simply in his rôle of poet, when he paints reality with the force and the imaginative suggestiveness that belong to it when rendered by a master artist, willing to eschew the ineptitude of commentary. And Hugo paints superbly though he moralizes impotently: he can visualize and render so much that is grand, and he can read so little into it when he stops to point the moral. How empty are such reflections on death as these:

Quoi! hauteur de nos tours, splendeurs de nos palais,  
Napoléon, César, Mahomet, Périclès,  
Rien qui ne tombe et ne s'efface!  
Mystérieux abîme où l'esprit se confond!  
A quelques pieds sous terre un silence profond,  
Et tant de bruit à la surface!

How quickly the unhewn and unshaped idea is swallowed up in its symbols! And up what vast and echoing stairways the poet disappears from the white upturned eyes of his auditors, grandiosely ascending nowhither! It would be idle to contrast this passage with such a supreme compound of poetry and philosophy as Shakespeare's "cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces"; but how it dwindles when compared with a typical passage from Hugo himself in which he is content to remain what nature made him—a marvellously gifted but purely descriptive artist:

Quand on passait près du monument sombre,  
On se le figurait, couronne au front, dans l'ombre,  
Dans son manteau semé d'abeilles d'or, muet,  
Couché sous cette voûte où rien ne remuait,  
Lui, l'homme qui trouvait la terre trop étroite,  
Le sceptre en sa main gauche et l'épée en sa droite,  
A ses pieds son grand aigle ouvrant l'œil à demi,  
Et l'on disait: C'est là qu'est César endormi!

After that, who would have the poet relapse into the moralist and descant on

L'idéal, ce grand but, Mecque du genre humain?



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Decidedly, such a verse proves that for its author moralizing is apt to be one of the seven deadly sins against the laws of poetry.

After religion, there is no subject on which Hugo has uttered himself so fully and so frequently as on history and politics. No poet was ever more immersed in contemporaneity, and none assuredly ever poured forth a comparable stream of political verse. Hugo makes his début in literature as a sort of poet-laureate of the restored monarchy. The poetry that smacks too much of the *pension* of Monsieur Cordier is closely followed by poetry that smacks too much of the pension of the king. From that time forth the political chord is never long silent on his lyre. The contemporary theme is his most constant inspiration. His political verse is really a sort of æsthetic journalism in which he is preluding an active public rôle. This very large portion of his work is doubtless doomed almost entire to ultimate neglect. It is already, along with the equally vulnerable portion devoted to moral and religious lucubration, nearly dead for the reader of to-day. The reason is obvious enough. It is in such poetry that he aimed to discharge his mission. Political and religious verse is not the kind in which an artist like Hugo, who substitutes imagination for insight, can hope to shine. His deliverances are oracular, grand, and cloudy. The precise, the logical, and the practical are absent to an extraordinary degree. "To belong to all parties by their good sides, to none by their bad," that is a programme almost as fine as it is unrealizable. Hugo legislates ends into being, scorning the embarrassing preliminary of considering ways and means. He remains removed from reality and possibility by the whole interval which separates the romantic poet from the statesman, and rhetoric from action. One may say of Hugo what he says of Paris:

Le jour où tu naquis, l'impossible expira.

If his poetry did not prove him the most imaginative of poets, his politics would. Even when he professes to deal edifyingly with ideas, in plain prose, even when he is making a speech in the Chamber, he declaims vaguely alongside of the subject, he encrusts it with a layer of resplendent images, he wraps it in a thickening haze of eloquent generalizations, and in the end musically lures it over the borders into dreamland. His auditors, who had come to hear an argument, are treated to a prose-poem. "Everything he said," says Jules Simon, "might have been put into verse." The reader of his later work will

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find that most of it was. No wonder that he exercised no influence as a parliamentary orator, and that he sometimes amused and always exasperated his colleagues when he drifted from the order of the day into a disquisition on the geography of the United States of Europe and the quickest method of achieving a French millennium. Let us—though not for long—follow him into this land of chimeras and examine some of the curious monstrosities that pullulate there.

It is regrettable that Hugo refused to be satisfied with the minor but very real success which the discreeter muse of Béranger found in patriotic song that was content to be merely patriotic. Hugo, without renouncing a single article of his narrow chauvinistic creed, wished to climb on the high steepes of Pindaric lyricism and at the same time to infuse into his song something of prophetic strain. The result is that he often impresses one as a *politicien d'estaminet* declaiming with incongruous splendors—

Vos pères, hauts de cent coudées,  
Ont été forts et généreux:  
Les nations intimidées  
Se faisaient adopter par eux.  
Ils ont fait une telle guerre,  
Que tous les peuples de la terre  
De la France prenaient le nom,  
Quittaient leur passé qui s'écroule,  
Et venaient s'abriter en foule  
A l'ombre de Napoléon!

How remote from the shrewd, alert, *terre-à-terre* patriotism of Béranger are these swelling dithyrambics—they are those of a pseudo-Pindar versifying the man on horseback and the ethics of Gallic Junkerism!

When we examine Hugo's ideas about history and politics, we find him involved in the same strange contradictions and in the same startling antitheses of black and white as in his philosophy.

L'avenir est un monstre avant d'être un archange.

He never realized that he was living in an age which had reconstructed history by seeing in the present the sum of what was fittest to survive in the past. On entering the Academy he had said: "Historic tradition is of importance to France; she can no more break with the past than she can break away from her own soil." But twenty years later, we get his maturer thought: "As for us, we respect here and there, and we everywhere spare the past, provided it consents

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to be dead." This seems inspired by the dictum: There is no good Indian except a dead Indian. It is the ungracious attitude of the wanton revolutionist who makes war on all tradition, and who sees in the social order only an ill-made machine to be discarded in favor of a new and more ingenious contrivance of his own. Such a pessimistic view of the historic past readily allies itself with the most flamboyant optimism. We have only to discontinue the ugly past, and the roseate future will straightway bud and blossom.

Hugo's handling of history is quite unspeculative. Of the subterranean currents that flow under the surface manifestations, of the good that is in process of creation and that has after all thus far precariously held the world together, the author of the "*Légende des Siècles*" sees almost nothing.

Je prends Froissart, Montluc, Tacite, quelque histoire,  
Et je marche effaré des crimes de la gloire,  
Hélas! l'horreur partout, même chez les meilleurs,

To some extent the personal motive may be invoked in explanation of the chasm which separates such utterances from the language used in Hugo's inaugural speech at the Academy, in which he celebrated as the three most radiant things in the world after God: royalty, beauty, and genius. The desire for popularity with the ultra-republican masses, by whom he hoped to be elevated to the presidency,<sup>1</sup> and furthermore the exigencies of anti-Bonapartist partisanship made it seem poetically expedient for Hugo to see with uncompromising oneness of vision—

Alexandre ivre et fou, César perdu d'orgies,  
Louis-neuf tenaillant les langues d'un fer rouge,  
Cromwell trompant Milton, etc.

Without some such guiding thread it is impossible to pick one's way in the labyrinth of Hugo's contradictory utterances. Are we to take him seriously when he says that nothing is easier than to insult kings, and that this is only an indirect mode of flattering the people? Or are we to take him seriously when he himself devotes the four volumes of the "*Légende*" to insulting them? In *l'Hydre*, for example, a knight appears who prepares to fight with the hydra. She asks for whom his hostile preparation is made.

<sup>1</sup> "Politics alone—and such politics!—did more for him than all his genius," says Brunetière.

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"Est-ce pour moi, réponds, ou pour le roi Ramire?  
—C'est pour le monstre.—Alors, c'est pour le roi, beau sire."  
Et l'hydre, reployant ses nœuds, se recoucha.

It is certainly the personal motive that makès Hugo see in the most popular of French kings, the gallant Henri Quatre (whom in 1819 he "carried in his heart," and as late as 1862 still called *bon*), the embodiment of a cruel and voluptuous laugh, just as he saw in that rather colorless monarch, Louis XIII, a descending knife-blade, and in the reign of the *grand monarque* only a horrid age when little famished children gnawed the bones of disinterred corpses.

Man had been all through the ages, more steadily than slowly, going to the dogs, when suddenly, like a hero in any of Hugo's plays, the French Revolution, *l'idéal armé du glaive*, leaps out of the earth and flies to the rescue.

Deux nuages traçaient au fond des cieux ce nombre:  
Quatre-vingt-treize—chiffre on ne sait d'où venu.

The Revolution has changed the whole order of things and has set all the people of the earth scurrying *ventre à terre* millenniumward, with France, "which perhaps alone knows the way," at their head.

Les fléaux disparus, faux dieu, faux roi, faux prêtre,  
Laisseront le front blanc de la paix apparaître.

Man has become little less than a god,

Le résultat de cet illustre effort  
C'était d'avoir grandi jusqu'aux cieux l'âme humaine.

"Bow down and be awe-struck and melted. God in person said *Fiat lux* the first time. The second time he caused it to be proclaimed. By whom? By '93" (the Terror), says Hugo.

Hugo falls readily into the old unhallowed fallacy that promises the sudden regeneration of mankind, their "Edenization," by striking off all their fetters—especially those which the stern discipline of time has imposed on their native madness. The less splendid conception of progress as dependent on the tardily growing virtue of mankind is replaced by this utopian faith in a sudden illumination, to be procured apparently by a copious reading of Victor Hugo's works supplemented by a judicious sprinkling of Voltaire's. With splendid confidence he cries out to his disciples:

Guidez notre marche unanime,  
Et faites vers le but sublime  
Doubler le pas au genre humain.



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This will cure all the diseases of the body politic with a celerity undreamed of by the unimaginative statesmen who clog the wheels of progress with their petty expedients and timid half-measures.

"Solidarity between men and between peoples, aid to oppressed nationalities, French fraternity producing by its radiance a European fraternity, these are the real political issues," says Hugo.

"The great Europe of the future is already beginning to outline itself. The tendency of nations is to form racial groups as a preliminary to the formation of continental groups. There are two phases of civilization logically bound together: first, national unity, then continental unity. These two advances will be the work of the nineteenth century; it has already nearly accomplished the former: it will not end without having accomplished the latter. A time will come when frontiers will disappear." Even in his old age, Hugo seems inclined to admit the necessity of a great war (the last) to bring this about—a war, of course, in which France shall be victorious. In fact, Hugo has not really progressed so very far from the Napoleonic ideal of his unrighteous youth:

Déjà, dans sa pensée immense et clairvoyante,  
L'Europe ne fait plus qu'une France géante,  
Berlin, Vienne, Madrid, Moscou, Londres, Milan  
Viennent rendre à Paris hommage une fois l'an;  
Le Vatican n'est plus que le vassal du Louvre.

Let it not be objected that there are difficulties standing in the way of this programme. Hugo has not only seen them, but he has seen the means for overcoming them. In 1830, he looked to England for salvation, and to "the union of France and England for immense results in the future of humanity." In 1842, he thought the future lay along the Rhine. France and Germany must control Europe and the world. The possible recalcitrance of England and Russia, for example, might be obviated by an alliance with Germany, that native land of the ideal, which will result in tossing England into the Atlantic and Russia into Asia. These little obstacles removed, Progress will resume its rapid course. "Si je n'étais pas Français, je voudrais être Allemand," says Hugo in 1840. He came very near getting a chance in 1870! In 1870, however, he wishes the war to continue until France shall have conquered and annexed the left bank of the Rhine so as to impose her language on the United States of Europe—inasmuch as the use of the German tongue would retard civilization three hundred years!

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"The people, begun by the eighteenth century, will be completed by the nineteenth. He is an idiot who doubts it. The future birth, the imminent birth of universal well-being, is a divinely fated phenomenon". . . . "One day we shall be stupefied." The human race, rising, will lift the lower levels out of the zone of distress *tout naturellement*. The effacing of poverty will be brought about by the mere raising of the social level."

"In the twentieth century war will be dead, the scaffold will be dead, royalty will be dead, dogmas will be dead, but man will live!" Such are Hugo's *esquisses rêveuses de l'avenir*.

Progress is, in other words, "an irresistible phenomenon of gravitation," and in this happy faith the poet awaits "the paradisaical transformation of the terrestrial inferno," and "the majestic embrace of the human race under the approving eye of God." Hugo is oblivious of the wiser words which the *æstrus* of inspiration had led him unguardedly to pronounce on another date: "All that is earthly is subject to sin. Sin is a gravitation." This one little obstacle to immediate and limitless progress, the inertia and mediocrity of the god Humanity, Hugo never understood. He never cared enough about the matter to achieve even this first sad step toward political wisdom.

An unhesitating adherent of this religion of Progress, Hugo, just as he had seen nothing but evil in monarchy, insists on seeing only good in democracy and liberty. He boasts that in all his works the reader shall find not a single line speaking against liberty. He might have gone even farther and have said that he had never written a single line restricting it! This point, at which the political thinker begins, is precisely the one at which Hugo ends. In his poetry Liberty is usually in the vocative case, and, after 1850, Democracy is salvation, and Revolution is its method. All this becomes with him a religion.

"The revolutionary sense is a moral sense. . . . He who is free is scrupulous, he who votes reigns. Hence incorruptibility, hence the extinction of unhealthy desires; hence eyes heroically lowered in the presence of temptation. The revolutionary sanitation is such that on a day of deliverance, a 14th of July, a 10th of August, there is no longer any populace. . . . Therefore there will be no more *jacqueries*. I am sorry for the knowing ones. This antiquated terror, which has had its day, can no longer serve in politics. The main-spring of the red specter is broken, everybody knows this now. The scarecrow no longer scares. . . ." Thus Hugo discourses and prophecies in "Les Misérables" only a few years before the Paris Commune,—

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"depuis mille ans," says Renan, "le jour où la conscience française a été le plus bas." To its defeated and fleeing partisans Hugo hospitably opened his door in Brussels—and Dame Gossip reports that his name had flitted on the lips of communistic men as one that might both give and gain glory in a ministry of their concocting. Victor Hugo cast for the rôle of Trotzky—that is matter for epic vision!

Hugo's ideas, being in reality only impressions and not convictions, are shaped and reshaped with the varying media that he moves in, being sometimes a mere condensation of the so-called ideals that were floating in the contemporary air, and sometimes extremely suggestive of the suspicion that they were related to no ideal whatever, except that of self-interest. In 1848, Hugo was still conservatively clerical, and monarchical. Why, in 1850, has he gone over so frantically to the opposition, changing not only all his views, but abandoning along with them all the assortment of heroic statuary around which he was accustomed to twine them in such brilliant festoons of poetry? Why do such fundamental changes of opinion on all things, personal, literary, religious, and political, come upon him simply because in the Chamber he has got up from a seat on the right and has sat down on one at the left? Was it not possible for Hugo to be a republican without straightway rehabilitating the whole rogues' gallery of eighteenth century literature and politics—for such Voltaire and his age had hitherto been in his eyes? Is the reversal of one's party politics one of those virulent but purifying diseases which extend through the whole body and leave no atom of the old man unconsumed? Why should a man of forty-eight years be so violently convinced of a host of things which at forty-six he violently rejected?

Hugo explains his political variations by invoking his extreme openness to the light. "An invasion of armies can be resisted; an invasion of ideas can not be resisted," he says. Accordingly, each time France was invaded by a new host of ideas, Hugo at first made an obstinately prolonged resistance; then, convinced that they had come to stay a while, he threw open the fortress of his mind to a straggling detachment from the rear-guard, remaining all the time ready to expel them and to entertain a garrison from the opposite party whenever it should demonstrate superior prowess. For example, in 1830, he calls the peerage a troublesome excrescence, in 1845 he enters it, and after 1852 is again its foe. In 1848 he votes to establish a senate. In 1852 he speaks of senates as ordures that should not

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be excreted alongside of constitutions. In 1876 he becomes a senator. In his plays, about 1830, we have a decided foretaste of that hatred of kings, and in his "Notre-Dame," at the same date, of that hatred of priests, which, twenty years later, were to become the corner-stones of his work. Why did he wait twenty years? Why did he let this fury slumber so long and so quietly? Doubtless because the reign of Louis-Philippe promised durability to both church and monarchy, and because it favored and cajoled the poet. In fact, the anti-Catholic chapters of "Notre-Dame" were written under the impression that the church would not be reconciled with the politics of the hour and were suppressed when its friends convinced Hugo of the contrary—and when the strength of Louis-Philippe's monarchy convinced him that it would prove lasting.

Hugo not very ingenuously bids us dismiss all his political utterances previous to his forty-eighth year as "an infantine lisp"—prolonging his infancy even beyond the limits that his severest critics would set. He conjures us to see, under his royalistic stammerings, learned while seated on the knees of a marquis, the secretly growing republican and humanitarian gradually attaining to consciousness of himself and of his mission. We are therefore to see his real political message in the utterances of his later years. Although he writes, in 1832: "*Quatre-vingt-treize est un triste asticot*," we must forget this indictment of the Terror, and remember that "*Quatre-vingt-treize a fait ce qu'il dut faire*." When he says, in 1848, that Marat does not deserve the honor of a statue, we must remember that he is still lisping, for later he compares him to Jesus and bids us venerate him. After 1851, he learns also to see in Robespierre an incarnation of virtue, immense and terrible. At the age of thirty-nine, in his Academic inaugural, he declares France to be unripe for republicanism, and scornfully adds that it is not an America, for to the aristocratic poet of that day we were a

Peuple à peine essayé, nation de hasard,  
Sans tige, sans passé, sans histoire, et sans art,

a people who had "substituted the revolver for the tomahawk." If this seem more severe than cordial, we should remember that Hugo saw us in a new light when he turned republican a few years later.

O nation suprême,  
Tu sais de quel cœur bon et filial je t'aime.

It must be added, however, that again he has only completed the circle, for in 1827 he had already seen in America "the future center



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of civilization and the land of emancipation, progress and liberty." As for France, he asserts, in 1841, that she can no more break with the past than with her own soil. But once more we must remember that in 1867 (three years before the Franco-Prussian war, which disreeter heads already foresaw) he hailed "the magnificent volatilization of France evaporating into fraternity, vanishing in transfiguration and becoming ubiquity and humanity," and "suffering sublime enlargement" as the center and capital of the republican United States of Europe. When, in his earliest work, he denounces "the impious, godless and shameful eighteenth century," we must remember what full amends he made it later. When he says to Voltaire:

Ta gloire est pure, et rien ne peut souiller  
L'éclat dont tes vertus la font encor briller,

we must remember that this also is a very early lisp. Twenty years after, he tells us that Voltaire was an ape endowed with genius and sent on a mission among men by the devil. Fifteen years later, he couples him with Jesus and with Luther.

Luther s'en va, Voltaire alors prend le flambeau.

It may be remarked at this point that, although Voltaire himself not over-modestly said:

J'ai fait plus en mon temps que Luther et Calvin,

that shrewd wit never confounded his activity with theirs, or felt that he was handling the same torch. Another ten years pass, and Hugo sees in Voltaire, with mingled joy and sadness, a glory to which the thinker says yes and no. Finally, after a lapse of fourteen years more, he startles us with the categorical affirmation that Voltaire was sent on a mission among men by the Almighty (and not by the devil, it seems) to continue the work of Jesus, with which his own concords and coincides. Here we have at last his mature judgment,—and it would be unjust to recall the aberrations of his youth when he asserted that "Jesus had better lore to teach than Voltaire."

In criticism of the whole theory of progress, humanitarianism and utopianism, here expounded under the ægis of Voltaire's name, that very conservative politician would assuredly have subscribed to the wise verses which Hugo once wrote, but which he suppressed, presumably because their wisdom would have seemed a discordant note:

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Ceux qui, pour calmer nos souffrances amères,  
Mettent des paradis au bout de leurs chimères,  
Ces tribuns embrasés et ténébreux qui font  
Gronder de sourds instincts dans le peuple profond,  
Mêlent Marat, Jésus, Voltaire et l'Évangile,  
Tout cela ne vaut pas quatre vers de Virgile.<sup>1</sup>

It should be abundantly evident from all that has been said, that Hugo's political philosophy, like his philosophy in general, varied from year to year, not to say from day to day. That he should enjoy the privilege accorded to all of shedding his errors and embracing new truths as they dawned on his exploratory intelligence, no one will gainsay. Nor can we reasonably refuse him the further privilege of having the latest version of his thought accepted as the most authentic. That, too, can suffer no question. Only it is vexatious that the versions of his thought not only contradict each other, but that it is the latest ideas that seem the most extravagant and the earliest ones that seem the most mature.

As to the means of bringing about the millennium which he so trustfully awaited, Hugo has not left us in the dark. The recipe is a very simple one, the diffusion of light—and the poet reminds us from time to time that light travels with marvellous velocity.

This diffusion of light is to be achieved by means of popular education. Hugo says, with a diffusive fervor worthy of the theme: "We must translate, comment, publish, print, reprint, put in type, stereotype, distribute, cry, explain, recite, impart, give to all, give cheap, give at cost, give for nothing, all the poets, all the philosophers, all the thinkers, all the producers of greatness of soul." Like Lord Curryfin, Hugo believes that a scientific organization for teaching everybody everything, would cure all the evils of society—a favorite humanitarian fallacy in our own day, which forgets the popular proverb about the difficulty of making the horse (and kindred animals) drink after bringing them to the stream. Hugo's enthusiasm for the universal diffusion of books, it may be added, is not tempered by the sobriety which serious preoccupation with books is apt to beget. In his private correspondence, when he talks of his desire to transport the multitude to the high mountain-tops, he is not in-

<sup>1</sup> When he says elsewhere that to revile Voltaire was held to be a notable exploit and counted as a claim to promotion among the *sbires de lettres*, the malign critic might note that Hugo's own variations on this theme were neither inopportune nor inexpedient.

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capable of adding that he fears that they may find there but little respirable air; but he is seldom so unguarded in his public utterances. These are always optimistic. Such political optimism implies an inordinate faith in the people, a veritable apotheosis of the common man, an unshakable belief in what Hugo calls "la toute-puissance sacrée d'un tourbillon d'intelligences." "The people have a claim to every kind of knowledge. The more divine the torch, the more it is adapted for their simple soul. We should like to see in our villages a chair for explaining Homer to the peasants." It is true that Hugo says elsewhere that Dante is as steep as Etna, and Shakespeare and Homer not less abstruse,—and he had once acknowledged that few men of each generation read intelligently Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare. Yet he is sure that the people will understand, for there is nothing too high for them,—another example of the dangerous flattery of the average man at the expense of those above him! One is inclined to say to Hugo in Emerson's words: "Leave this hypocritical prating about the masses. Masses are rude, lame, unmade, pernicious in their demands and influence, and need not to be flattered but to be schooled." Yet Emerson himself, despite his secluded life, found it difficult to resist the infection of democratic optimism; how then could we expect a watchfully waiting candidate for the French presidency to take Demos critically?

Hugo, in his expansive mood, lets no misgivings chill his boundless faith in the possibility of universal enlightenment, in the saving power for the great multitude, of the classics, to which he resorted so little himself. He entertains no such pusillanimous fears as Anatole France, who predicts that the multiplication of books will land us in paralysis and madness. It may not be quite so bad as that, but was Hugo altogether wrong when he wrote:

Ignorer, c'est pleurer, et savoir, c'est gémir?

In constructing chimeras it costs absolutely nothing to make them complete. They are the only human products that are uniformly perfect. The people will, of course, choose the best and most salutary books. The simplification of labor by machinery will give them the desire and the leisure for intellectual things. "Vast appetites for thought will awaken in every brain; the insatiable thirst for knowledge and for meditation will more and more become the chief human interest; the lower regions will be deserted for the higher,—this is the natural ascension of every growing intellect; *Faublas* will

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be abandoned for the *Oresteia* of Æschylus." We are truly a long way from the aristocratic Hugo of thirty years earlier who thus described the populace,

Liquide et fangeuse, et pleine de courroux,  
La populace à l'œil stupide, aux cheveux roux.

In the half-century since Hugo wrote, obligatory and gratuitous instruction has been almost universalized, and the masses everywhere can read; but their vast appetite for thought is mainly fed by the newspaper, and it is to be feared that they read and understand Shakespeare and the *Oresteia* almost as little as Hugo himself did.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it seems in these days as though, after this generation has passed away, the *Oresteia* may be decipherable only by a few scattered devotees, worshipping in austere solitude the things of the spirit, while all around them the world, ignoring literature, is busy reading the six best sellers. As for meditation, it will then no longer be roaming fancy-free in the old fields of thought. It will have become wholly practical, efficient, and productive, and will be fruitfully conning in the pages of the current monthlies the latest theories of prison-reform, eugenics, and alcoholism. This blessed consummation, as we have seen, is chiefly to be brought about by the schoolmaster. "You enter a schoolroom: bow lower; do you know what the master is doing? He is manufacturing minds." It is, of course, the schoolmaster *in posse* rather than *in esse* to whom Hugo bows so low.

Chaque village aura, dans un temple rustique,  
Dans la lumière, au lieu du magister antique,  
Trop noir pour que le jour jamais y pénétrât,  
L'instituteur, lucide et grave, magistrat  
Du progrès, médecin de l'ignorance, et prêtre  
De l'idée; et dans l'ombre on verra disparaître  
L'éternel écolier et l'éternel pédant.

Like a true disciple of Rousseau, Hugo forgets to tell us where such masters are to be recruited. They will, at any rate, hardly come from among the graduates of the higher institutions of learning now existent, for these Hugo all his life consistently denounced, possibly because the university critics, in "that Asinarium, the Sorbonne,"

Endroit revêché et mauvais lieu,

had mostly looked askance at his work.

<sup>1</sup> "Of the Greek drama," says Brunetière, "I doubt whether he understood anything except the vulgar jesting of the 'Frogs.'"



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A quoi rêvait Sorbon quand il fonda ce cloître,  
Où l'on voit mourir l'aube et les ténèbres croître?

In his ideas on education, Hugo again exhibits the usual romantic revolt from discipline and the love of anarchic freedom. In *Ce qui se passait aux Feuillantines vers 1813*, a poem full of ingenious and truculent playfulness, set off by a very pretty prodigality of poetic fancies, he pleads the cause of the pupil against the master, and of liberty against discipline. But his poetry is better than his pedagogy. Instead of uniting the *utile* and *dulce*, he separates them, and at bottom gracefully demands that the schoolboy shall have a vacation all the year round, inasmuch as the impulse from the vernal wood is in truth the only genuinely edifying one. Yet to more staid and unromantic minds, the schoolmaster, so comically caricatured here, is after all not so far wrong when he says that

La sévère étude  
Était fille de l'ombre et des cloîtres profonds;  
Qu'une lampe pendue à de sombres plafonds,  
Qui de cent écoliers guide la plume agile,  
Éclairait mieux Horace, et Catulle, et Virgile,  
Et versait à l'esprit des rayons bien meilleurs  
Que le soleil qui joue à travers l'arbre en fleurs.

It is worth noting here that Hugo's own education has been well described as "lacking at once method, discipline and morality"—and, I am tempted to add, content.

Like most of his contemporaries, Hugo had moments of enthusiasm when, alongside of the democratic idol, he set up that other materialistic fetich of nineteenth century thought, science.

"It is by science that we shall realize the august vision of the poets: *le beau social*. We shall make Eden over again by a + b." As we have already seen, Hugo looked to aviation for the effacing of frontiers and the ushering in of universal fraternity. When he occasionally looks to science for the performance of this miracle, we may momentarily see

S'envoler le calcul de Newton  
Monté sur l'ode de Pindare.

But these are only flitting moods, echoes of boulevard chatter inspired by aeronautic feats and the divagations of journalistic prophecy. Fundamentally the true romanticist is unfriendly to science. In spite of his humanitarian enthusiasm for the popular diffusion of knowledge, Hugo, true to his primitivism, cherishes at the same time the revo-

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lutionist's secret distrust of culture and of learning, of logical thought and of methodic research.

L'idéal est un œil que la science crève.

A thorough-going romanticist, Hugo holds, here too, for the instinctive. The numerous passages in his poetry in which he exalts the animal instinct above the human reason are symptomatic. Take the donkey alone: the donkey is for Hugo what the owl was for Minerva. Marching through his works is a long procession of donkeys—all (like the poet himself) busy seeing God.

In *Magnitudo Parvi*, Hugo expounds his favorite doctrine, that where science gropes blindly, the eye of primitive faith sees clear. Treated modestly and within limits, this notion may yield very fine poetry—and a philosophy perhaps as good as many another. The intuitive method has always proved itself much more intimately related to the poetic side of man's nature, especially, than the colder analytic processes of pure reason. Hugo's underlying idea is the same as that of Wordsworth's great *Ode*, and it is nowise unfair to see in the difference of tone an index of the different levels of inspiration on which the two poets move. Hugo characteristically elevates insight by decrying science. His sleepless shepherds, fantastic revampings of the Chaldaean *magi*, pierce to the core of the problems which have baffled "blind Ptolemy and myopic Newton."<sup>1</sup> Compare with this childish irreverence the English poet's noble lines on Newton's bust:

The marble index of a mind forever  
Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone.

Darwin, as is to be expected, fares even worse than Newton. He is only "an Englishman, correct, well-dressed and wearing clean linen," who says: "God made you a man, I make you a monkey!" Hugo will have none of this: "The French Revolution has given us the rights of man, not those of the monkey." He is ready to lean over his humbler animal friends with the kindest of feelings, but he will not be identified with them:

Qu'on éclaire leur nuit, mais qu'on s'y précipite,  
Non!

Yet—O inconsistency!—he elsewhere asserts that the donkey who turns aside to avoid treading on a toad is holier than Socrates and

<sup>1</sup> Hugo was doubtless unaware that in matters of theology Newton inclined, like himself, to the methods of the Chaldaean *magi*.

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greater than Plato—an example of what may be called philosophy à la crapaudine. And in a forgotten passage of his “Dieu” he even fell into the Darwinian heresy himself:

L’ange commence à l’homme et l’homme au chimpanzé,  
. . . Es-tu sûr de ne pas jeter l’ombre d’un singe?

That so imaginative a poet as Hugo should feel a certain impatience with the plodding methods and the often disenchanting results of science is both natural and pardonable.

Hommes, vous disséquez le miracle, vous faites  
De la chimie avec le songe des prophètes . . .  
Science, ton scalpel n’apprend qu’en détruisant,  
Si tu n’étais science, on te croirait envie.  
De la nature, pompe auguste de la vie,  
Vous faites un haillon, ô vivants, un lambeau,  
Une loque, un néant; et le ver du tombeau  
Nomme cela manger; vous l’appelez connaître.  
Toi, savoir! tu ne sais que décomposer l’être.

But why this tone of hateful denunciation, this picture of the scientist as an envious and destructive sciolist? Why did Hugo, so punctiliously polite in social life, dispense so often with good-breeding in literature? His tone becomes quite intolerable in “L’Ane.” He here denounces all science and all philosophy, just as in “Religions et Religion” he denounces all religions, as vain and delusive rubbish. The poem is in the form of a dialogue (one is tempted to say, a monologue) between the philosopher Kant and a still more philosophic donkey, who appropriately does all the talking, and, after demolishing all human philosophies, graciously offers in their place another which—is, perhaps, not unworthy of its source. Hugo in “The Donkey” hardly rises to the level of his subject; but his invariable tendency to identify himself with his creations is once more strikingly exemplified, which does not mean that he is for a moment confounded with the taciturn Königsberg philosopher. Perhaps the only thing really proved by the poem is the poet’s absolute ignorance of Kant.

The attitude of our revolutionary poet toward society and its institutions for self-preservation is equally negative and hostile. Hugo’s anti-social spirit is only a product of the most facile and vulgar form of demagogy. This is unfortunately, one of the surest passports to popularity with the masses, who, before the sword is melted into plow-shares, like to see the apostles of fraternity brandish it, just a

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little, under the noses of unconvinced brothers. In "Les Misérables," Hugo's utopianism appears in its most generous and engaging form, so much so that his fascinated readers are carried along unquestioning by its powerful current. They undoubtedly come away with deepened sympathies, if not with clearer social ethics, from this eloquent plea for social solidarity embodied so persuasively in these multitudinous and sympathetic pictures of outcast humanity. Clearer social ethics, however, no reader will find here. Under the current of generous sympathy, and happily often nullified by it, is an undercurrent of hostility and revolt. This gospel of social solidarity is at the same time a gospel of class-hatred, of anarchy and of insurrection, an impatient and calumnious indictment of the whole social apparatus for maintaining law and order. *Le fait social est absurde*, Hugo says summarily. All this protracted warfare on society and its institutions is the irresponsible declamation of a romantic iconoclast running amuck against the existing order of things, which he is not able to understand, in the name of a hazy idealism, which he understands quite as little. It was this hazy and impracticable idealism, coupled with his instinctive love of the melodramatic, that led Hugo so early and so persistently to occupy himself with so comparatively unimportant a social question as the abolition of the death-penalty.

The key-note of "Les Misérables" is condensed in the following lines:

Un homme est innocent; son voisin le dénonce.  
Le juge examiner, différer! A quoi bon?  
On entre jeune au bagne et l'on en sort barbon.  
Être rebelle est grave, être innocent est vain;  
Sachez que la justice est la justice enfin . . .

Jamais

Les grands et les heureux qui sont sur les sommets  
Ne se penchent vers ceux qu'engloutit la justice.

This severity toward the upper classes is offset by a corresponding indulgence toward the lower classes, which often degenerates into a maudlin tenderness towards the criminal.<sup>1</sup> The social philosophy of "Les Misérables" is only an eloquent amplification of the insensate line in which Hugo indicts the guillotine:

<sup>1</sup> The only sure way—barring panegyric—to gain the good will of Hugo was, apparently, to assassinate somebody. His zeal in pleading against capital punishment was such that he was always ready to hail any prospective victim of it with fraternal sympathy. For his intervention in the case of the ferocious murderer Tapner, cf. Marzials: *Victor Hugo* (105-6).



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Tous les crimes du faible ont pour source les vôtres.

Hunger, poverty, misery, and, above all, his social superiors, are solely responsible for any shortcomings, such as murder, arson, and thievery, into which the child of the people may be misled,

Si des dictateurs font un forfait bien noir,  
L'homme du peuple en est juste aussi responsable  
Que peut l'être d'un coup de vent le grain de sable; . . .  
Il fait la catastrophe et le vent fait le crime,

which consideration leads to the logical conclusion:

Personne n'est méchant, et que de mal on fait!

Logic, however, never holds Hugo very tenaciously fast; he slides back into his indictment of society at large for individual shortcomings:

Je dis que ces voleurs possédaient un trésor,  
Leur pensée immortelle, auguste et nécessaire; . . .  
On a de la pensée éteint en eux la flamme;  
Et la société leur a volé leur âme.<sup>1</sup>

It is the old sophism: Society, composed of ignorant men, is responsible to each of these ignorant men for his ignorance.

It is worth noting also that Jean Valjean, "the convict transformed into a Christ," leaves a royal fortune to Cosette—and five hundred francs to the poor. Is the moral of the whole story then, after all, hinted in his words to Cosette: "You had red hands once upon a time, mademoiselle, you have white ones now"? Certainly, from any point of view, the last half of the novel is but an idle tale, a penny-dreadful written by a man of genius—a sorry fact, in view of the very great

<sup>1</sup> This argument, the central thesis of "Les Misérables," is amusingly parodied by Bret Harte: Condensed Novels: *Fantine*.

"About this time Fantine was turned away from the manufactory, and met with a number of losses from society. Society attacked her, and this is what she lost:

First her lover.  
Then her child.  
Then her place.  
Then her hair.  
Then her teeth.  
Then her liberty.  
Then her life.

What do you think of society after that? I tell you the present social system is a humbug."

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beauty of the earlier part and of the superb power and picturesqueness that are interspersed throughout.

Such are the dangerous fallacies that Hugo preaches to the eager multitude. They are those of which the demagogue still makes capital, and which find enlarging echoes in the more violent socialistic and anarchistic conventicles of to-day. Is it not surprising, however, that a society, so active in persecuting the innocent, should have been so tolerant of the accusing poet and his implacable indictments? His anniversaries and festivities have been more political than literary, and the magistrates, ministers, and other pillars of the social order whom he so savagely denounced have been the most eager to heap up flowers of rhetoric in his honor—nay, these representatives of the politest nation on earth have even had the delicacy, in erecting the poet's monument, to exclude Racine, whom Hugo despised, from the band of marble poets who hail his triumphal *entrée* into Elysium.

In trying to arrive at the ideas on literary art entertained by a literary artist, it is only fair to invoke his practice rather than his theory. His genius speaks for itself there far better than it can through the indirect medium of the intellect. This is especially true in the case of a poet so curiously uncritical as Hugo, the least critical assuredly that ever existed, says Brunetière. His practice is, however, sufficiently discussed in other chapters; let us pause a moment here to consider his theories. There is no lack of sources, for he was, like Dumas *filis*, terribly prefatory. Beside his many prefaces, he has written the worst, as he has inspired the next worst, volume of criticism extant in any tongue—his own study of Shakespeare and Swinburne's study of Hugo. In his "Shakespeare" he has given us his critical testament. The preface to his "Cromwell," a youthful piece of criticism which has far more charm of style, and in which all the empty corners of the logical structure are gracefully filled up with ingenious and sparkling metaphors, is mainly technical and destructive. It is a dashing cavalry charge made to dislodge the lingering pseudo-classicists from their last defenses, and is more bent on breaking than on illuminating their bald pates. His other prefaces are, as Lemaître says, *lourdement insensées*,—they are headbreaking in a very different sense of the word.

In his "Shakespeare," Hugo not only defines his attitude toward criticism, but incidentally furnishes some examples of his own strength and weakness as a critic. The criticism which discriminates and judges

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we must not seek here, for he scorns it with all the ferocious superiority of the man of genius who has himself been subjected to it. He was, besides, decidedly ill-equipped for such tasks. He knew no English and seems to have read very little of Shakespeare even in translation, while of Shakespearean criticism he has no knowledge whatever. Intent on his favorite notion that genius is always persecuted and insulted, he naïvely enumerates among the enemies of Shakespeare not only those who have most highly praised him but even those who have actually made his reputation in England: Ben Jonson is the *éternel envieux*; Dryden, Pope, and Addison are vermin in the mane of the lion; Johnson and Coleridge are cited as supreme examples of unappreciative critical stupidity! Add that only a small fraction of the book is really devoted to Shakespeare (80 pages out of 474, says Biré), and, as Faguet has pointed out, that neither Shakespeare's philosophy nor his psychology is even touched upon, and we may form a tolerably just notion of Hugo's conception of the functions of judicial criticism and of the respect in which he holds its methods.

As an impressionistic critic, he makes a better figure. He occasionally renders, with his own peculiar eloquence, the *frémissement*, the stupor of admiration or the delirium of enthusiasm into which a piece of literature may plunge a romanticist who reads exclusively with his temperament and not with his intelligence. He renders such sensations with an intensity that sometimes has enough glow to illumine the work, but it is the illumination of the random lightning-flash, not the continuous light of the critical torch. Like all impressionistic criticism, it is more suggestive than convincing. It is a revelation of what one poet can read into the work of another, rather than of what actually is in it. When these two elements have some accidental correspondence, we may get from Hugo an excellent page of critical characterization. He has spoken of Rabelais and of La Fontaine, for example, in an intimately appreciative manner, as one who really felt their spell. But oftener the content of the work is one thing and Hugo's impression of it is quite another, with the result that we get pages purely fantastic like those on Lucretius ("Lucretius is the sphere, Shakespeare is the globe"), utterly distorted like those on Juvenal (who is declared a greater poet than Virgil), or (if I may speak so boldly in these Freudian days), delirious like those on Saint John, whose Apocalypse is defined as an *explosion de virginité amoncelée*.

Between Hugo's practice of his art and his theory of it there are very striking contradictions. Genius, of all things the most exceptional, is

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by its very constitution aristocratic, and this is peculiarly the case with a poet like Hugo, whose work as a whole, and especially in its more brilliant and acceptable examples, so readily falls into the category of art for art's sake. Yet, with a strong temperamental vein of primitivism, and with intellectual conceptions that are even naïvely primitive, it was natural that Hugo, especially when his art is conscious rather than instinctive, should aim, as the poet of a democratic age, to produce popular art. As a result, the substance of his work is largely popular, the manner is mainly aristocratic.

So far as it is not a result of his corrupt craving for popularity, Hugo's theoretical denial of the aristocracy of art derives from his primitivism and from his consequent aversion from discipline, rules, traditions, and the tyranny of "good taste." His exaggerated independence led ultimately to a purely individualistic and anarchic conception of art, by which the vicious circle is completed, and instead of an aristocratic art aiming to please a select audience, we get an art aiming primarily to please its producer, because he recognizes no standards either high or low outside of himself. It is essentially idiosyncratic. Nothing could be less popular, in the true sense. It is indeed so exclusive that, instead of being simply aristocratic, it is really imperialistic. Byron called himself the grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme; Chateaubriand, Hugo, and even Balzac, all in turn came to feel themselves secret rivals of the great captain.

The theoretical difficulties in which Hugo thus becomes involved are obvious. Although his work is highly ornate and recondite in manner, it is nevertheless addressed to the multitude. This implies the belief that it will reach its address, in other words that the many, those least tinctured with literature, are its proper judges. Hugo does not hesitate at such a paradox.

"The people, at bottom, have delicate taste. They love the poets, they demand the ideal. They prefer a star to a rush-light."

"The court of Versailles admires as a regiment drills; the people rush with mad ecstasy upon what is beautiful. The great beast with a thousand heads is there, the *mob* of Burke, the *plebs* of Livy, the *fex urbis* of Cicero; it caresses the beautiful, it smiles upon it with the grace of a woman, it is very subtly literary; nothing equals the delicate taste of this monster. . . . One feels there the presence of God."

This heresy Hugo clung to all his life; he states and restates it with the same one-sided emphasis as Tolstoi reiterated his equally extravagant paradox.



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This point of view, which would make the power of literary appreciation (and what is this but the power of critical discernment?) a far more common gift than it is currently assumed to be, a gift, in fact, accorded to all but the competent few, would logically be quite hostile to the idea of art for art's sake. It acknowledges the legitimacy of external appraisal, the measuring of the excellence of a work by its effect, in other words, by its popularity with the many, just as more conservative judges estimate it by its effect and its popularity with the few that are supposed to be more especially competent. In acknowledging the capacity of a public to comprehend, Hugo implies the right of the critic to exist.

The critic, as such, however, Hugo loudly repudiates,—everybody almost, he holds, can appreciate literature, except the critic. He does not maintain this so consistently, of course, that in an unguarded moment he does not indulge in a retroactive contradiction. "Certainly nobody understands and admits more than I do the elevated and serious criticism under whose jurisdiction belong Æschylus, Isaiah, Dante, Shakespeare themselves, and which has the same authority over the spots of Homer, as the astronomer has over the spots of the sun." This is only a temporary fit of sanity into which Hugo, whispering in the ear of a correspondent, has been inadvertently betrayed. When he speaks publicly and officially, he makes no such perilous admissions; then the critic is merged in the courtier, admiration is a duty, and blame a form of high treason only to be explained as envy.

"What! no critics? No. No censure? No. You explain everything? Yes. Genius is an entity like nature, and, like it, must be accepted purely and simply. A mountain is a thing to take or to leave. . . . In genius everything has its reason for existing. It is, because it is. Its shadow is the reverse of its clarity. Its smoke comes from its flame. Its precipice is the condition of its height. We like this more and that less; but we remain silent where we feel the presence of God."

"Do not hope then for any criticism. I admire Æschylus, I admire Juvenal, I admire Dante, in the mass, in the block, as a whole. I do not question these great benefactors. What you call fault, I call accent."

At this point, the divine nature of genius being assumed, Hugo's creed suddenly becomes not simply artistic, but imperialistic. Whereas the divineness of the many made them peculiarly capable of comprehending *le grand art*, the divineness of the artist, on the other

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hand, lifts him up into an impenetrable isolation. Hugo assures us that there is a "superior taste," which is the rule of genius, and which is inaccessible except to genius, "that height which dominates everything and still remains virgin, Jungfrau." This taste is a mystery, impossible to define, but vested with every right because it has every power. Every man of genius, being compounded according to a special logarithm, and his essence being the Unknown, the equilibrium of his artistic product is latent, its proportions are mysterious, they belong to the arcana of grand art, penetrable only to the higher criticism of enthusiasm. Genius therefore is superior to criticism. Art, like the infinite, has a *Because* superior to all *Whys*. Genius, like nature, must be accepted without reservations. We should admire everything, admire like brutes. The critic is a consumptive scolding the hurricane.

The man of genius is a being "imperious, tumultuous, violent, headlong, extreme, who gallops on winged steeds, who overleaps bounds, who exaggerates, who makes scandalous strides, who flies abruptly from one idea to another and from the North pole to the South." May I be pardoned for observing *sotto voce* that this is the most accurate description anywhere to be met of a violent madman? It is also an accurate enough description of many of the moods of the ultra-romantic poet—of

That delirious man  
Whose fancy fuses old and new,  
And flashes into false and true  
And mingles all without a plan.

It is thus that the romanticists of 1830 have done so much to discredit literature and bring it into contempt in the court of sober good sense—so that in the eyes of the scientist, the historic student, the philosopher, as of the plain practical man, literature has too often come to seem a form of irresponsible play, and those who busy themselves with it, a species of dilettantes, gracefully effeminate and decoratively insignificant in a world where serious realities hold the stage. Even in antiquity, Cicero, that supreme model of the man of letters, asserted that, were the span of his life to be doubled, he would not read the lyric poets. Can we blame these contemners of poetry for their attitude, if the poet brings to them chiefly melodious outbursts of intemperate egotism, indiscreet confidences about his love-affairs, and wild, chimerical and contradictory utterances about all the problems of life? In trying on such grounds to exalt genius, Hugo really degrades it. Instead of conceiving it as something exquisitely human,

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profoundly conscious of its own active powers, and susceptible in largest measure of refinement and ennoblement through experience and reflection, Hugo reduced it to a freakish sport of nature, a lawless mystery, a wild force possessing its owner. Genius is not the human rider, but the fiery steed to which, like Mazeppa, he is helplessly tied.

Sa fonction est d'être énorme,  
Sans s'occuper du cavalier.

In short, Hugo conceives every kind of genius as compounded according to the formula of his own; genius was for him only a resplendently shimmering chaos. The term *monster* is in his vocabulary the highest compliment, just as *swan*, his favorite epithet for Lamartine—that "*Racine réussi*"—implies a secret but profound contempt for Lamartine as well as for Racine. Thus Hugo sees in Æschylus the *lion du drame monstrueux*, in Dante another lion, and still another in Shakespeare. He tells us that Mirabeau was a bull, a lion, a tiger, an athlete, a peacock, a North-wind, an ocean, any and everything apparently except a man and a statesman. At this rate a congress of poets would seem to be a menagerie, and a library of their works a museum of monstrosities, while literary criticism would become the art of ringing variations on the phrase: Well roared, lion!<sup>1</sup>

We have here come face to face with the central and generating principle of Hugo's art and also of his art-theories. We see now why he defines romanticism, the unrestrained expression of this wild personality, as liberty in art—without ever inquiring what it is that the artist is at liberty to do, and without seeing that absolute liberty is equivalent to anarchy. Lawless and anarchic art, knowing no limitations save the sovereign caprice of the poet, and refusing to submit to the rule of reason,—what else is the romanticism of Hugo? With his remarkable talent he has succeeded in giving very striking form to this false type of art, but it was impossible that brilliancy of execution, however great, should atone for this fundamental disdain of good sense, or should save his work from having a disquietingly hollow ring at every point where surface luxuriance requires to be supported by a solid substratum of rationality.

His repudiation of criticism and consequent denial of all standards made him of all poets the one whose taste is most unsure and most

<sup>1</sup> For a lucid discussion of this point of view and of Sainte-Beuve's humanistic protest see "The Masters of Modern French Criticism," by Professor Irving Babbitt (p. 181 ff.)

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vicious, the one whose form, though often achieving the maximum of brilliancy, is also the most meretricious, and the one whose message, if he can be said to have any, is the most marred by idiosyncrasies, and the most recalcitrant to the seriousness and the sanity, as it is to the discipline, which underlie all really great literary work. Hugo's theory did not make art an expression of what is most noble and perfect in man, for that implies lucid self-control and the chastened wisdom of experience, but made it on the contrary an expression of the untamed, aboriginal, instinctive and barbaric self, with all its wild force and all its native madness. The result may still be, and in his case it undeniably is, both impressive and splendid, but it is necessarily unedifying. The consistent practitioner of a theory so fundamentally false is doomed to be a poet not of order but of chaos, an *amuseur* whose feats may have the privilege of sometimes pleasing and of always exciting us, but from whose spectacular performance we depart no richer than we came in experience or in thought—or in respect for the performer.

It may be doubted whether any judicious reader of Hugo ever feels that he has contracted an intellectual or a spiritual debt to the writer. His warmest admirer, unless hopelessly uncritical, reads him for pleasure, and for pleasure alone. We do not turn to him as we do to the greater ancient or modern writers, for enlightenment. The poet perpetually invites us to a feast of reason—but if we accept, it is in the same spirit as we should accept an invitation to the vaudeville or the circus, in order to witness unheard of feats of topsy-turvydom and to see all the respectable ideas standing on their heads.

The one inevitable impression that we connect with the theater and the circus is that of their unreality. The characteristic that strikes us most forcibly in Hugo's thought, in the pageant of the universe as it filed in processional splendor through his mind, is likewise its unreality. We feel that the objects of his thought are only shining fantasies that had for him no substantive reality. I for one can, at any rate, not take him seriously as a philosopher, and must be content to refer those who crave a more reverent treatment of his speculative flights to the volume of Renouvier, "Victor Hugo Philosophe," where the subject is handled with infinitely more ability—and naïveté—than I could command. Is it altogether my deficiency in the former quality that incapacitates me for finding Hugo either profound or philosophical, and that leaves me, after turning over Renouvier's pages, only more thoroughly convinced than before that Hugo's speculations



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are only smoke and fog, only vacuity expanded to infinity and translated into absurdity,

Un sombre brouhaha de choses imbéciles,

speculations of about the same calibre as those of his contemporaries Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Leroux, who invited us to turn the world upside down in order to verify the correctness of their guesses about the other side of it?

If, as Hugo asseverated, the poet is a seer and an oracle, "a volcano perpetually erupting truth," then I can not but confess that I have lived these many moons on the slope of this cloud-wrapt Krakatoa with little fear of sudden extinction, and have enjoyed without travail of spirit a magnificent rumble of sound strangely disproportionate to the volume of solid product ejected. I have been reminded, now of Horace's parturient mountains, and now of Veuillot's inspired gibe: *Hugo c'est Jocrisse à Pathmos.*

The great thinkers of the ages have sown their profound ideas broadcast. Second-rate minds catch the ideas without their profundity, Hugo caught the profundity without the ideas. He can not think, but he can mimic with great skill and protracted endurance the bent attitude of the thinker.

Qu'on ne s'y trompe pas, je n'ai jamais caché  
Que j'étais sur l'énigme éternelle penché.

He became in fact so enamoured of this attitude that he used to have himself photographed from time to time in poses of rapt meditation. The resultant icons he used to label "Victor Hugo talking with God," or "Victor Hugo listening to God." This meditative pose is histrionically perfect, and, had Hugo never spoken, we might have been convinced. But alas! he has spoken! And his words lack utterly the seal of experience and of sincerity. They are those of a masquerading romanticist, who has undertaken to put God and the universe into rhyme in the same high and holy mood in which Mascarille proposed to put the whole history of Rome into madrigals. It is this that makes Hugo seem so insignificant beside our serious English poets—even beside a poet of negation and revolt like Byron. The intellectual content of Byron's poetry is by no means great; his attitude toward life was radically unsound, and his criticism of his age was unjust and bitter. But at any rate Byron had ideas about life, and he had ideas about his age, and he rendered them with burning intensity and un-

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mistakable clearness. When we read him, we are always conscious that we are seeing the world from the Byronic stand-point, from a stand-point half cynical, half ironic, and ultimately untenable, but which has, at any rate, the merit of existing, of being real and apprehensible (and not a rose-colored haze or a murky fog), and finally of bearing the stamp of a powerful and even extraordinary personality. If not the poet of progress, he is at least the poet of revolt. Hugo's poetry has none of this definiteness. "Victor Hugo," says Julian Schmidt, "has been taken to task for the inconstancy of his opinions; this is unjust—for he really never had any." His work is a tossing sea of inconglomerate details, without design or pattern, a dazzling kaleidoscopic chaos. He sings unintelligently of both progress and revolt, understanding neither. It is rhetoric, and the vision of truth is denied to the rhetorician. And what he can not himself attain, he can not impart to others.

It is equally vain to turn from the work to the man, to his correspondence, to his conversation, to seek the golden sediment deposited by the river as it flowed. He abounds, of course, here as elsewhere. No man of letters lived a more public and appropriated life, or was more surrounded, interviewed, reported, visited, and lionized. Not a syllable dropped from his lips that was not caught up, re-echoed and recorded. And yet, when we review this vast encyclopædia of utterances, public and private, from youth to extreme old age, before his exile, during his exile, and after his exile, what do we find? Corybantic deliverances whose insignificance is only equalled by their pretentiousness, mighty volumes of smoke rising from the smouldering remains of abandoned campfires in the world of thought which the poet has appropriated and over which he invites us to warm ourselves.

Empty,—that is the final verdict that posterity will write on Hugo's philosophic monument. For what nutritive grain of wisdom can we find in all his denunciations of throne and temple, in his picturesque tormentings of nature, in his dismal and distorted versions of the past, in his incoherent and roseate prefigurings of the future, in his antithetic and melodramatic conceptions of humanity, and in his translation of all human and superhuman things into dazzling fireworks? How can we accept as a thinker, a poet of whom one may in perfect safety venture the assertion that there is not a single subject of deep human concern on which he has not uttered the most palpable and portentous nonsense? I do not speak as an ardent admirer, but do his most ardent admirers always speak so very differently? Mon-

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sieur Stapfer, certainly not the least candescent among them, says: "His Catholicism and his royalism had entered his heart through his imagination. They were driven out, not by a profound crisis of his intelligence, but by the new demands of his vocabulary, by the rapid extension of his poetical gamut, which, content at first with a simple key-board, soon demanded other notes and the symphony of an orchestra. It is the image, it is the *verbe*, it is the word, which alone has engendered all the theories, religious, political, social, and literary, of Victor Hugo." As the French say, *on n'est trahi que par les siens*. I had thought, but I had almost hesitated to say, as much.

In groping thus helplessly in a fog of chimeras and illusions, Hugo suffers after all only the common lot; but what we miss, and painfully miss, in his case, is the reconciling bond that can unify these perplexing experiences, the bond which can be furnished only by a character nobler and larger than the intellect which has assembled for its use and its appeasement these disparate fragments from the intellectual chaos in which we are doomed to live, and which consecrates their variations by putting them invariably to nobler use; what we miss is that illuminating spark of diviner light which enables the voyager to move onward without suffering shipwreck although his human lights have failed to afford sure guidance. Hugo lacks a religion of life behind his philosophy of life and shining through it, in the guise, not of speculative pronouncements about the infinite, but of steadfast nobility of thought and aspiration. If, as Renouvier ruefully acknowledges, Hugo's moral teaching has been quite ineffective, it is not because he lacks speculative lights—and he most palpably did lack them—it is because he lacked character, sincerity, and purpose; so much so that his reader must regretfully feel, in the presence of this great genius, that he is the poet's moral superior—and not his pupil.











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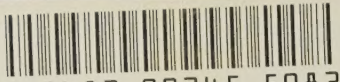
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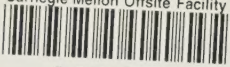
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